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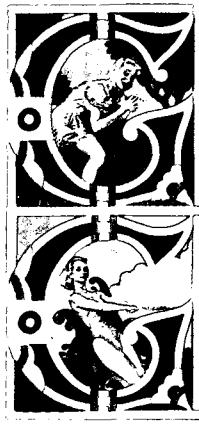

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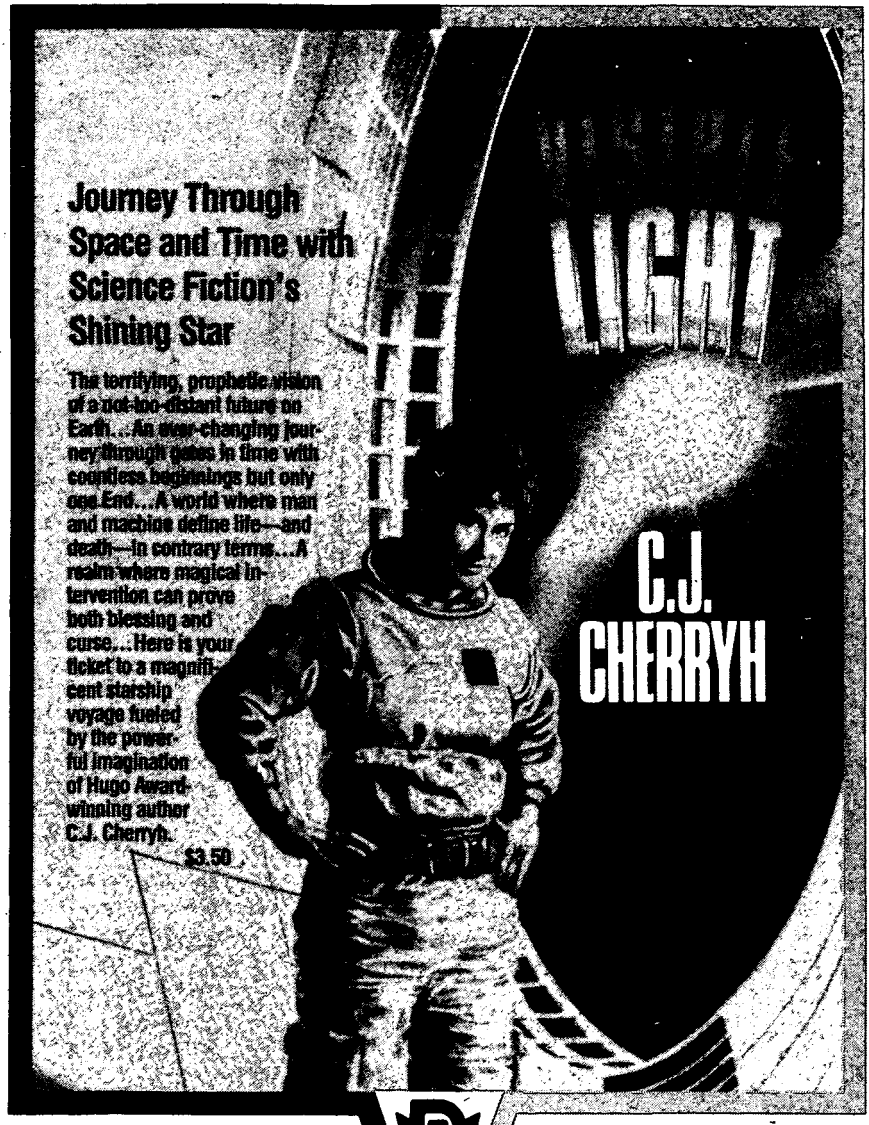
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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

WRITING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

There is an exceedingly useful volume entitled *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* edited by Peter Nicholls (Doubleday, 1979) to which I frequently refer. Recently, as I leafed through its pages en route to looking up something, I came across the following passage:

"... the intellectual level of a book is not necessarily expressed by a marketing label. Much adult sf, the works of ... Isaac Asimov, for example, is of great appeal to older children, and is to some extent directed at them."

The second line of three dots in the above quotation signals the omission of a few words in which the writer specifies two other science fiction writers. I omit them because they may resent the original statement and may not feel I ought to give the remark further circulation.

As for me, I don't object to the comment because, for one thing, I consider it true. I write my "adult" novels for adults, but I have no objection whatever to young people reading them, and I try to write in such a way that my novels are accessible to them.

Why?

First, it is the way I like to write. I like to have the ideas in my novels sufficiently interesting and subtle to catch at the attention and thinking of intelligent adults, and, at the same time, to have the writing clear enough so as to raise no difficulties for the intelligent youngster. To manage the combination I consider a challenge, and I like challenges.

Second, it is good business. Attract an adult and you may well have someone who is here today and gone tomorrow. Attract a youngster and you have a faithful reader for life.

Mind you, I don't write as I do with the second reason in mind; I write as I do for the first reason I gave you. Nevertheless, I have discovered that the second reason exists, and I have long lost count of the number of people who tell me they have an astronomical number of my books and that they "were at once hooked after reading my book, so-and-so, when they were ten years old."

But if the same books can be read by both adults and youngsters, what is the distinction between truly adult books (ones that the

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writer of the item in *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* would judge as possessing a high "intellectual level") and truly juvenile books?

Let's see. Can it be vocabulary? Do adult books have "hard words" while juvenile books have "easy words"?

To some extent, I suppose that might be so. If an author makes a fetish of using unusual words, as William Buckley does (or Clark Ashton Smith, to mention someone in our own line), then the writing grows opaque for youngsters and adults alike, for it is my experience that the average adult does not have a vocabulary much larger, if any, than a bright youngster does.

On the other hand, if an author uses the *correct* words, hard or easy, then the bright youngster will guess the meaning from the context or look it up in a dictionary. I think the bright youngster enjoys having his mind stretched and welcomes the chance of learning a new word. I don't worry about my vocabulary, for that reason, even when I am writing my science books for grade school youngsters. I may give the pronunciation of scientific terms they are not likely to have encountered before, and I sometimes define them, but I don't avoid them, and after having given pronunciation and definition I use them freely.

Well, then, is it the difference between long sentences and short sentences?

That is true only in this sense: It is more difficult to make a long

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sentence clear than it is to make a short one clear. If, then, you are a poor writer and want to make sure that youngsters understand you, stick to short sentences. Unfortunately, a long series of short sentences, like a long stretch of writing with no "hard" words, is irritating to anyone intelligent, young or old. A youngster is particularly offended because he thinks (sometimes with justice) that the writer thinks that because the youngster is young, he is therefore stupid. The book is at once discarded. (This is called "writing down," by the way, something I try never to do.)

The trick is to write clearly. If you write clearly enough, a long sentence will hold no terrors. If you hit the proper mix of long and short, and hard and easy, and make everything clear, then, believe me, the youngster will have no trouble. Of course, he has to be an intelligent youngster, but there are a larger percentage of those than of intelligent oldsters, for life hasn't had a chance yet to dull the youngsters' wits.

Is it a matter of subject matter? Do adult novels deal with death and torture and mayhem and sex (natural and unnatural) and all kinds of unpleasantness, while juvenile novels deal with sweetness and niceness?

You *know* that's not so. Think of the current rash of "horror" films, which fill the screen with blood and murder and torture and are designed to frighten. Youngsters flock to them, and the gorier they are, the more they enjoy them.

Even censors don't seem to mind the mayhem. When there are loud squawks from the righteous who want to kick books out of school libraries, the objections are most often to the use of "dirty" words and to sex. However, I have, in my time, lived half a block from a junior high school and listened to the youngsters going there and coming back. I picked up a lot of colorful obscenity, both sexual and scatological, in that way, for I had forgotten some of what I had learned as a youngster. I think the youngsters themselves would have no objection to books containing gutter language and sexual detail—or fail to understand them, either. *That* distinction between adult books and juvenile books is not a natural one but is enforced by adult fiat.

(I admit that I use no gutter language or sex in my juvenile books, but then I use no gutter language and very little sex in my adult books.)

How about action, then? Adult books can pause for sensitive description of all kinds, or for a skillful and painstaking dissection of motivation, and so on. Juvenile books tend to deal entirely with action. Is that right?

Actually, the distinction is not between adults and juveniles, but between a few people (both adult and juvenile) and most people (both adult and juvenile). Most people, of whatever age, are impatient

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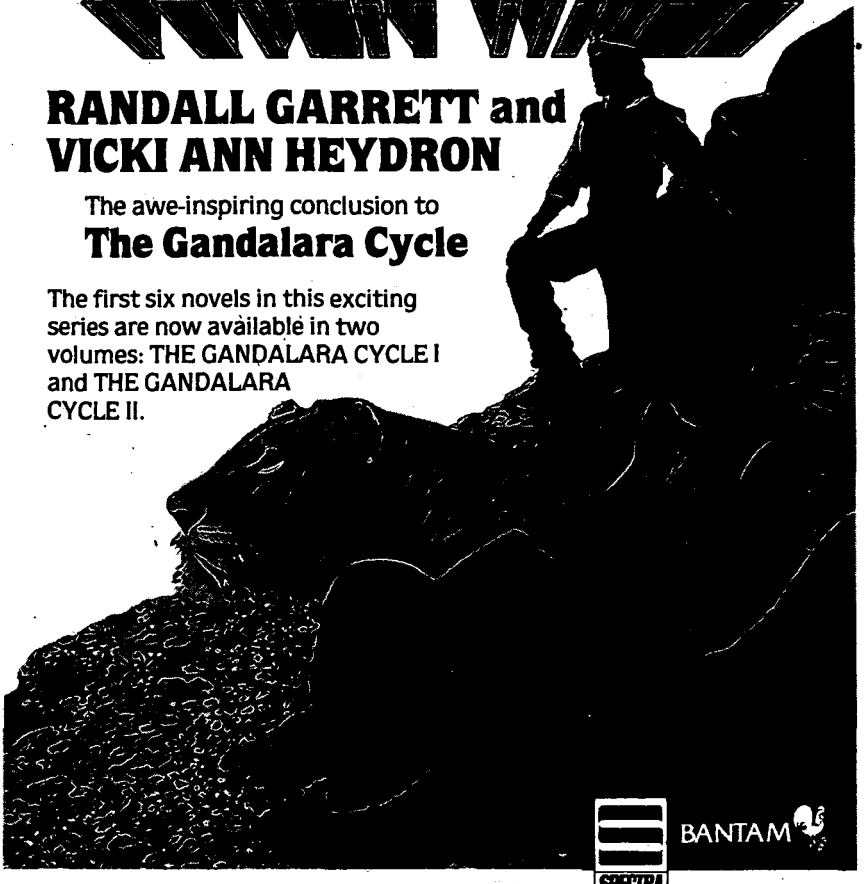

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SPECTRA BANTAM

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with anything but action. Watch the popular adventure programs on television, subtract the action, and find out what you have left, and then remember that it is adults, for the most part, who are watching them.

On the other hand, my books contain very little "action" (hence no movie sales) and deal largely with the interplay of ideas in rather cerebral dialog (as many critics point out, sometimes with irritation) and yet, says the *Encyclopedia,* I appeal to youngsters. Clarity, not action, is the key.

Can it be a question of style? Are adult books written in a complicated and experimental style, while juvenile books are not? To be sure, a juvenile book written in a complicated and experimental style is more apt to be a commercial failure than one written in a straightforward style. On the other hand, this is also true of adult books. The difference is that tortuous style is frequently admired by critics in adult books, but never in juvenile books. This means that many adults, who are guided by critics, or who merely wish to appear chic, buy opaque and experimental books, and then, possibly, don't read them, aside from any "dirty parts" they might have. Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" springs to mind. My dear wife, Janet, is reading it, every word, for the *second* time but there are moments when I see the perspiration standing out, in great drops, on her forehead.

How about rhetorical tricks? Metaphors, allusions, and all the rest of it, depend upon experience, and youngsters, however bright they are, have not yet had time to gather experience.

For instance, my "George and Azazel" stories are pure fluff, but they are the most nearly adult stories I write. I use my full vocabulary, together with involved sentence structure, and never hesitate to rely on the reader to fill in what I leave out. I can refer to "the elusive promise of nocturnal Elysium" without any indication of what I mean. I can speak of the Eiffel Tower as a "stupid building still under construction" and depend on the reader to know what the Tower looks like and therefore see why the remark is wrong, but apt. Nevertheless, the stories are meant to be humorous and all the rhetorical devices contribute to that. The young person who misses some of the allusions nevertheless should get much of the humor and enjoy the story anyway.

In short, I maintain there is no hard and fast distinction between "adult" writing and "juvenile" writing. A good book is a good book and can be enjoyed by both adults and youngsters. If my books appeal to both, that is to my credit. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Isaac,

In his always delightful column, Martin Gardner says (Mid-December 1985) that the origin of "raspberry" in the sense of a rude noise made with the lips is unknown. Since this will undoubtedly be my one and only chance ever to correct Martin Gardner, I hasten to do so.

The genesis is Cockney rhyming slang. You recall that this replaces a word with a phrase ending in a rhyme—for example, "plates of meat" for "feet" or "trouble and strife" for "wife"—and then often goes on to use only the first part of the phrase, thus turning "feet" into "plates" and so forth.

Well, a certain sound not supposed to be heard in polite society came to be called "raspberry tart." Later the reference moved anatomically upward. . . .

Best,

Poul Anderson
Orinda, CA

Dear Martin,

"Raspberry," in the sense of "Bronx cheer," is Cockney rhyming slang: raspberry tart.

John Brunner
South Petherton, Somerset
England

Thank you, Poul and John, for explaining this. These vestigial philological remnants are always interesting. For instance, to call a person a "mother" is now a deadly insult. We know why, of course, since it is an incomplete phrase, but people a century hence may wonder what sort of Freudian antipathy gave rise to it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

How truly amazing the "Letters" section has become in recent months. I'd suggest a separate publication, to be called *Asimov's Letters* (naturally), but no, hey, this is a *fiction* magazine.

On most occasions the editorial comments written by yourself cut directly to the core of the matter. However, you seem to get caught on the concept of "flatly impossible," a phrase you have used repeatedly.

No doubt you conceive your audience as being intelligent, imaginative, and for the most part, able to discern between reality and speculation. Whether we read the stories for extrapolation, sociology, or pure escapism, I believe this is a fair assumption. In the face of this, why do you fall back on "flatly impossible"?

All the stories in *Asimov's* and similar magazines depend on the

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suspension of disbelief to entertain their reader. Much of science fiction is based on one of those "suspensions," that being time travel. Recursive thoughts would suggest that if time travel were *ever* going to be invented, we would know about it already, and, sadly, such is not the case. But this doesn't mean that we cannot enjoy stories which use time travel as their base; rather, they need to be well written.

Flatly stated, then, "impossibilities" don't mean a thing if the story's entertainment value makes it worthwhile to read. *IAsfm* stories usually are.

Sincerely,

Hal Hintze
Wausau, WI

If a story deals with a perpetual motion machine creating energy out of nothing, it all depends on whether the author manages to present a plausible explanation, or if he clearly indicates that he never heard of the law of conservation of energy. If the latter, then I'm sorry, we don't suspend disbelief to that extent.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

What is reality? I stand firm in opposition to the street talk and cheap sex of twentieth century urban America—whether in my daily affairs or in the pages of the magazines I read. These things are real but far from universal!

As an infant, my parents "helped" with certain "natural functions" that seem now to be newsworthy. When I grew older, I no longer needed help performing bodily functions of eating and elimination, and consequently, I have little need to *read about them.* I know how it's done; I presume all people old enough to read this magazine also know pretty much all there is to know on the subject. To me, such nonsense in a story is mere filler when the author is unable to provide something more interesting. In Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* one does not read about everything happening behind closed doors; who needs to?

For those seeking *relevance*, an abused term if ever there was one, did you buy *IAsfm* to read the twenty-first century equivalent of what is happening today in Detroit and Philadelphia? Not I; Philadelphia is real all right, real street talk, etc. Since no person can possibly contain ALL reality within their limited cognizance, we must be a bit choosy. I have chosen the adventurous reality here in Iceland: glaciers, lava caves, waterfalls, tundra, an ancient and exotic language. It is like living in a Poul Anderson novel come to life. Is it real? It certainly is—and almost entirely free of the reality that lately clogs the pages of *IAsfm.*

I concede one important point: that a magazine must cater to its readership. If most of its readers are in Detroit and Philadelphia and similar urban ghettos, and prefer to read about crime and riots and PDE (Post-Disaster Earth) instead of what might be happening a long time from now and far away, then the editor will of course choose appropriate stories.

Sincerely,

Michael Gordon
FPO New York, NY

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I suspect that the ancient and exotic language you speak of has gutter talk in it, and that on a proportionate basis there is ample misery and heartache in Reykjavik, too. You may be choosy, but to run away from a problem is no great act of heroism. Cicero quoted, with approval, a statement from Terence: "I am a man: nothing human is alien to me."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Folks at Asimov's,

This is just to thank you and let you know that another of your offspring has finally made good. My first publication was with you, in the March 1978 issue, the story "Chariot Ruts." And that didn't come easily. George Scithers (then editor of *IAsfm*) worked hard with me on that. I still appreciate and benefit from all that useful advice.

Now my first novel has come out and another is due in the spring. They are both by Atheneum and are aimed at the ten to fifteen-year-old group. The first one, *Winter of Magic's Return*, is a fantasy set in post-nuclear winter Britain. The second, *A Question of Destiny*, is a contemporary science fiction story with a political setting. And there are more in the works.

So thanks again for all the patience and rewrites and getting me started. You guys are awfully good to hopeful writers.

Sincerely,

Pamela F. Service
Bloomington, IN

If we're being cast in the role of proud parents, thank you. It gives us great pleasure to serve as a gateway. However, now that you are writing novels (and this goes for all writers with growing success) you can best express your gratitude by continuing to write the occasional shorter piece for this magazine.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

As you know, I usually praise the magazine and my high opinion has not changed.

However, I could not resist a brief comment on two of your selections for the October 1985 issue. "Taking the Low Road" by Avon Swofford is a beautiful story that I quite enjoyed, but I am at a complete loss to understand why it was selected for your magazine. It does not seem to fit any extension or interpretation of the genre. As enjoyable as the story was, I would have looked for it in other material that I read when I have time.

The other story that bothers me is the one by a favorite author of mine, Frederik Pohl, "The Things that Happen." This is a marvelous little story, very representative of the Pohl story-telling style which so often reminds me of Bradbury. However, it makes the error that I believe Dr. Asimov has criticized in the introduction to his mystery stories if my memory serves me correctly. Its only claim to science fiction is the last four lines, in which a "magic" or "fantasy" or "improbable science" ending is attached to an otherwise ordinary story.

Not all stories or articles interest me and as I have said in the past, that is as it should be. At the very least, in reading the variety, I gain

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an appreciation of the interests of the readers. However, when I get the opportunity to read, I consume a variety of material, and when I open a "science fiction" magazine, that is what I look forward to, anticipate, and expect. These two stories, although extremely well written and very enjoyable, I feel, should have been published in another collection of equally high caliber but different orientation. In conclusion, I wish the magazine would arrive one per month instead of two or three at a time with two and three months in between. However, that seems to be a problem common to the post office systems of both our nations. They must go to the same "foul mail" seminars. I trust that you will continue to pay Martin Gardner anything he asks. The same goes for your artists (and yourself). I trust in the self-professed vanity of the good doctor to keep him appearing periodically in your pages.

Thank you for continuing to make my occasional lunches enjoyable (that is when I find time to read the magazine).

Yours very sincerely,

Ed J. Brogden
Sarnia, Ontario
Canada

I suspect that some science fiction writers are experimenting with the task of seeing how nearly they can write a good main-line story with a science fiction aspect of some sort. It's not the sort of thing that I would like to do, but it's an interesting experiment for those who like it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy
and Dr. Asimov,

First, I want to say that I will miss Shawna as editor of *Asimov's*. You have made some very good changes to the magazine. As I have trusted you to bring me good reading, I also trust your choice for *Asimov's* new editor. Good fortune in your next endeavors.

Now my original reason for writing. In the December '85 issue the story "O Little Town of Bethlehem II" by Robert Young was a pleasant enigma for me. At first I thought it was going to be a cutesie story about Christmas, set on another planet to allow it into your hallowed pages. The first three scenes depict well the shallowness of the culture, I easily recognized aspects of our own. Why Young chose 33 A.D. as the time for the birth of Jesus, instead of the more accepted 3 B.C. is curious but does not detract from my enjoyment of the story.

What I had thought was going to be a shallow and cutesie story turned into a deep and telling reflection of current hypocrisy, so ingrained as to be invisble to its owners. A very good and thoroughly thought provoking tale. Thank you Shawna.

Jesse Chisholm
333 Wartburg Place
Dubuque, Iowa

Actually, the usual guess at Jesus's birth-year is 4 B.C. and the usual guess at the year in which he was crucified is A.D. 29—but they are only guesses. The Bible gives no dates in our sense.

—Isaac Asimov

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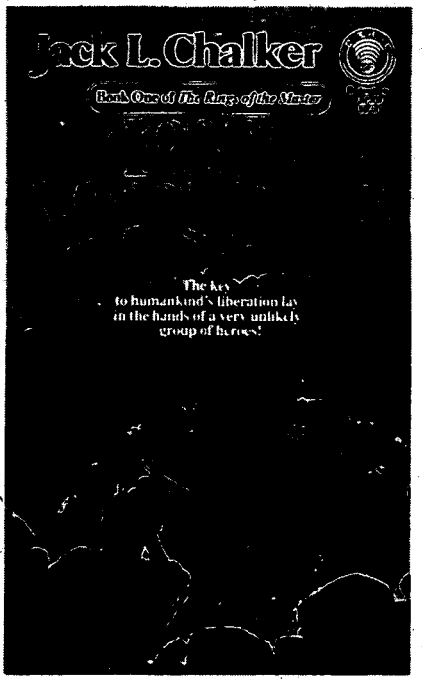
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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Let me go out on a limb. *Warrior Knights* (Games Workshop U.S. $24.95) is the best board game released in the past year. With a bit of well-deserved luck, it will go on to be a classic.

The King is dead, and players, taking the role of one of six barons, each try to fight and scheme their way to become the new Lord of the Empire. Game play in this rich, involving game is very straightforward, yet there is a wide range of strategies that can be used to gain power.

A Baron has four nobles under him, each capable of leading an army. At the start of the game, troops are allocated to each noble and a stronghold is selected for the Baron. The game sequence has two movement rounds followed by an Assembly round. In each movement round Barons receive income from cities and concessions that they control. Then their nobles can move and attack cities, castles, and other nobles. Combat is resolved on a simple chart where the odds and a die roll will determine who retreats or who might be eliminated. Castles and cities may be "sieged," an entertaining procedure where a noble's troops literally try to force their way in.

The Assembly round is a complete change of pace. First, there are new mercenary troops to bid for. The bidding is secret, with the mercenaries going to the big spender. Then there's the Assembly, an actual meeting of the Barons where all players vote on a variety of motions. (Your votes are based on the amount of cash you have as well as the number of cities that you control. This is, after all, a less egalitarian age than our own and votes can actually be bought. *Imagine!*) At each Assembly there are at least three Assembly Cards on the table. These contain the motions that can provide lucrative concessions, like wool, ambassador posts, or even the appointment of a Baron to a Governorship. Concessions can bring added loot (and more votes) while a plum appointment carries with it new troops. For example, the position of Archbishop of Lenz comes complete with 200 maintained troops.

In the multi-player game, Barons take turns being the Assembly Chairman, while another holds the Veto. The Veto, though powerful, can only be used to nullify the "Yes" vote on one motion. At the end of the Assembly, Chairman and Veto cards move on to the next

(continued on page 123)

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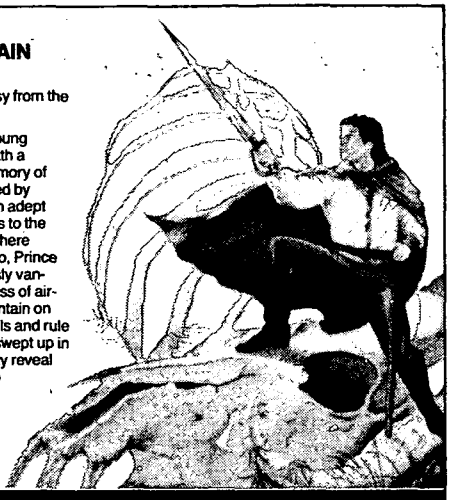

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VIEWPOINT

POSTSCRIPT ON PRESTER JOHN

(Adventures in Unhistory)

art: Hank Jankus

by Avram Davidson

This delightful Viewpoint came across our desks virtually the same day as Robert Silverberg's cover story, "Gilgamesh in the Outback." At first glance, an article on the historical question of the existence and identity of Prester John may seem to have only a little to do with fantasy and not much at all to do with science fiction. Taken in tandem with Mr. Silverberg's novella, however, we think you will see how this bit of synchronicity was just too perfect to pass up.

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VIEWPOINT

On learning that on or about the year 1165 the same letter was delivered—that is, that one letter was delivered in triplicate—to the Byzantine Emperor Emanuel, to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick, and to the Pope Alexander III, a natural question would be, *How? How* delivered? Whatever else existed then or did not exist, two things did not then which do today. There were no police forces. And there were no mail services. *Did* someone, in the depths of Farther Asia, say to someone else, "Since you're going to Europe anyway, so drop off these letters as you pass by Byzantium, Rome, and wherever Fierce Freddy is torturing recalcitrant tenants these days; *if you please* . . ."

Or did someone not?

For somebody must have either ridden or trudged up with the Letter to those three palaces. "Letter for the Emperor!" we can imagine him saying. Easily. What is somewhat more difficult to imagine is the reply. Was this, "Throw it over the postern gate," or, "The drawbridge doesn't open for 'nuther hour," or, "What news on the Rialto?" or, "Yeah? Who's it from?"

To the answer, "From Prester John," however, it is doubtful that any but the most ignorant gateporter would have come back with, "Prester *Who?*"

Because, even before the arrival of the Letter, by whatsoever means, those in the know in Constantinople, in Rome, and in whatever place the Holy Roman Emperor (who was actually always a German) was currently keeping his capital, had already heard of Prester John.

As you are all about to.

There was a story told in the late 1940s of an American scholar who, finding listed the book he wanted in the catalogue of the Vatican Library, filled out a call-slip for it . . . only to have the slip returned, with the comment, **Missing since 1555**. If any of the three original copies of the Letter from Prester John had survived the attrition of the centuries, one would suppose it to have been the one to the Pope; say what one will, the popes kept a good library. But one would be wrong. The one surviving copy is the one to the Byzantine Emperor. How

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come? That's one of the many mysteries about the Letter . . . and, for that matter, about Prester John himself. *Who was he?* Don't you wish you knew?

"Prester" is an old form of the word priest, and evidently it survives in this sole usage alone, it being no secret that it is simply a short form of the word presbyter; and, as Milton informs us, in, I think, his *Aeropagetica*, "New presbyter is but old priest writ large." (Why "new"? Well, that would take us into the seventeenth century, and we haven't even finished with the twelfth yet.) "Prester John," then, means "Priest John," or "John the Priest." In my ever-so-distant youth every corner drugstore—and there was, almost, a drugstore on every corner; and if you didn't want drugs you could always go there for an ice cream soda, a box of candy, a tuna-fish sandwich, or items of a sort which are now displayed as openly as Band-Aids but which were then Sold For The Prevention Of Disease Only and kept next to the opium and guarded by a dragon which would strike you dead if you were under eighteen years of age—every drugstore had a bunch of bottles labeled *Father John's Medicine*, next to the Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. You might, therefore, refer to Prester J. as "Father John." But I shouldn't, if I were you.

Well, you may ask, what is more natural than that a priest, be he named John or whatsoever he be named, why should he not write a letter to the Pope—or to this or that emperor, if he so wished? It is true that a cat may look at a queen, but is also true that it was unlikely for a mere priest to be writing to anyone of higher station than, say, his own bishop; or the lord of the manor in which he lived: if he had cause to try and catch the attention of those higher than that, these two would have been the logical ones to try and do it for him. Or not, as the case might be. For in those days, you see, every man knew his place, for every man had a place to know. A place on Earth, for one thing. And a place in paradise thereafter . . . all supposing he were obedient and dutiful in the keeping of the laws sacred and secular.

However, this one was no ordinary priest.

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VIEWPOINT

"'Prester' is an old form of the word priest, and evidently it survives in this sole usage alone, it being no secret that it is simply a short form of the word presbyter; and, as Milton informs us, in, I think, his *Aeropagetica,* 'New presbyter is but old priest writ large.'"

And, for that matter, no ordinary letter.

It begins with the words, *John, Priest by the Omnipotence of God.*

John, Priest by the Omnipotence of God and the Power of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings, Ruler of Rulers, hopes for the well-being of his friend Emanuel, Prince of Constantinople, and Governor of the Romans, and wishes that the Grace of God be with him in the future.

Or so, in one version—likely a copy of a copy—at least. Remember that this Letter had no official status. Copyists were therefore free not only to make mistakes (a privilege which they maintain to this day) but to make changes, if they felt like it. Presumably the copies of the Letter to the Holy Roman Emperor and to the Pope began more-or-less the same, with changes appropriate in the matter of names and title. We might point out that, as for titles, the Byzantine Emperor did not call himself "Prince of Constantinople and Governor of the Romans," and that if he had, these would have been about at

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the bottom of the list; probably they might have been borne by his youngest son as mere courtesy titles: much as the Prince of Wales is, also and incidently, "Lord of the Isles and Baron Renfrew." However, Prester John might perhaps be excused for not knowing enough at least to begin with such basic items as, say, "Emperor of Rome, of New Rome, and of the East, Caesar Augustus, Autocrator, Sebastocrator," and so on for miles and miles; Prester John might perhaps be excused for not knowing all this, because Prester John was not from Europe. He was not even from Asia *Minor*. He was from far, far away, indeed.

He was from, in fact, so far, far away, that no one, really, exactly knew how far away—or even approximately—or, exactly, or even approximately, *where* he was from: so, as was common enough in those days, as it had been back in days long before that, they said he was from India. Now, *we* know where India is: it is, for one thing, on our nice, neat Rand McNally or National Geographic Society maps: it is an extremely large peninsula, a subcontinent it is often called, and it protrudes into the Indian Ocean, with Pakistan on its west, Burma and Bangladesh on its east, etc., etc. But in times past people had not these nice sureties. They were, to say the least, somewhat confused, and the confusion went back to the times of the ancient Greeks.

Recall that before the magnetic compass not even North and South were known for certain, that East and West depended upon the shifting position of the Sun's path, as the swift seasons rolled. All that was known about certain far-off lands were these undeniable facts: if you turned at the Nile and traveled immense distances you came at last to a land where it was very hot, and the people were very dark, and there were crocodiles in the rivers. Originally, no doubt, this description was intended only to describe and define the country we now call The Sudan. In Africa. Later it was to be extended under the name of Ethiopia. But just keep in mind that Alexander the Great did not really want to discover the sources of the Niles; he really wanted to conquer Persia. So he did not keep on

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heading south, neither did he turn and head west: he turned and went east. He did indeed conquer the Persians. He traveled immense distances. And eventually he came to a land where there were crocodiles in the rivers.

Obviously, Ethiopia (from the Greek *Ethiops*, meaning "burned").

However, the people there, not having the benefits of a good Greek education (or even a bad one) seemed not to know that their country was Ethiopia; they said it was India. Well, well, what's in a name, Ethiopia was India, then? So India was Ethiopia; heat is heat, far is far, dark people are dark people, crocodiles are crocodiles, rivers are rivers; hadn't Homer himself sung of "Ethiopians of the sunrise and of the sunset"?—yes, he had. So by the time of the Middle Ages it was generally understood that there was more than one India: and that they were one Hell of a long ways away.

Also, very rich.

This may surprise us, thinking, as we do, of India as very poor. But in those days there was still gold in India, still diamonds, and lots and lots of spices, worth their weight in gold and diamonds: not only did spices taste good, they were good medicine, the antibiotics of the day; and also kept meat from spoiling.

Often.

So when word began to get around Europe that there was a Christian kingdom in, of all places, India!, no one scoffed. Everyone listened. We today know that, if there is not exactly a Christian kingdom in India, there are Christians in India. And why shouldn't there be?, in view of all the missionaries who have gone there and still are going there, from Europe and America. However, the facts are that there were Christians in India even before missionaries went there from Europe and America . . . before America was "discovered" by Europe, under the impression that *it* was India. There was a belief, a tradition, and one which, having never been disproven, is still held by some today; that when the Apostles Peter and Paul and Matthew and John and Barnabas, and so on, went north and west, preaching and converting, and establishing churches, one of the

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VIEWPOINT

Apostles went east. To wit, St. Thomas. The doubting one. And kept on until he got to India, where he preached and converted and, of course, established churches.

Consequently the appearance in western Christendom earlier in the twelfth century of someone called "John, Patriarch of India," while it caused surprise, did not cause either astonishment or suspicion. It did of course cause great interest. Keep in mind that "patriarch" here is used neither in the sense of "the patriarch Abraham," nor in that of "the Patriarch of Constantinople": the meaning here is that of an ecclesiastical official of about the rank of archbishop; Lisbon, for example, has a Patriarch. Of course the Pope was well aware that he had not himself appointed or authorized any patriarch in India; but if this fellow John was decent enough to come all the way to Rome, the Pope was not going to quibble: chap wants to be called "Patriarch," does he? Very well. Nice chap. Touch of the tarbrush, no doubt, but no harm in that: see how politely he kisses Our hand. One of you chaps in the Roman Curia, catechize him and see if he knows the right Doctrine, give him nice little presents, and make sure that he doesn't go gallivanting off to either the Eastern (or Byzantine) Emperor or the Holy Roman (that is to say, Western) Emperor, upsetting the balance of power. *Pax vobiscum*, er, ah, oh yes! John! Mmm.

Next!

"John, Patriarch of India," presently went away; back to India, presumably, where, not knowing how immensely valuable the spices were, he mixed them all up with his rice and fish and called it *curry*.

And now, after all these years, here was a letter from him, see: *John . . . Priest . . .* not even "Patriarch" this time: see what it says here? *Priest*. Modest chap. Must be getting on in years. What does he say?

—But before we see what he said, let us talk a bit more about the question of, Quote, India, Unquote. What I have said about the "native" Christian churches in India was intended by me to refer to India-the-country-of-that name-as-we-know-it-today. But

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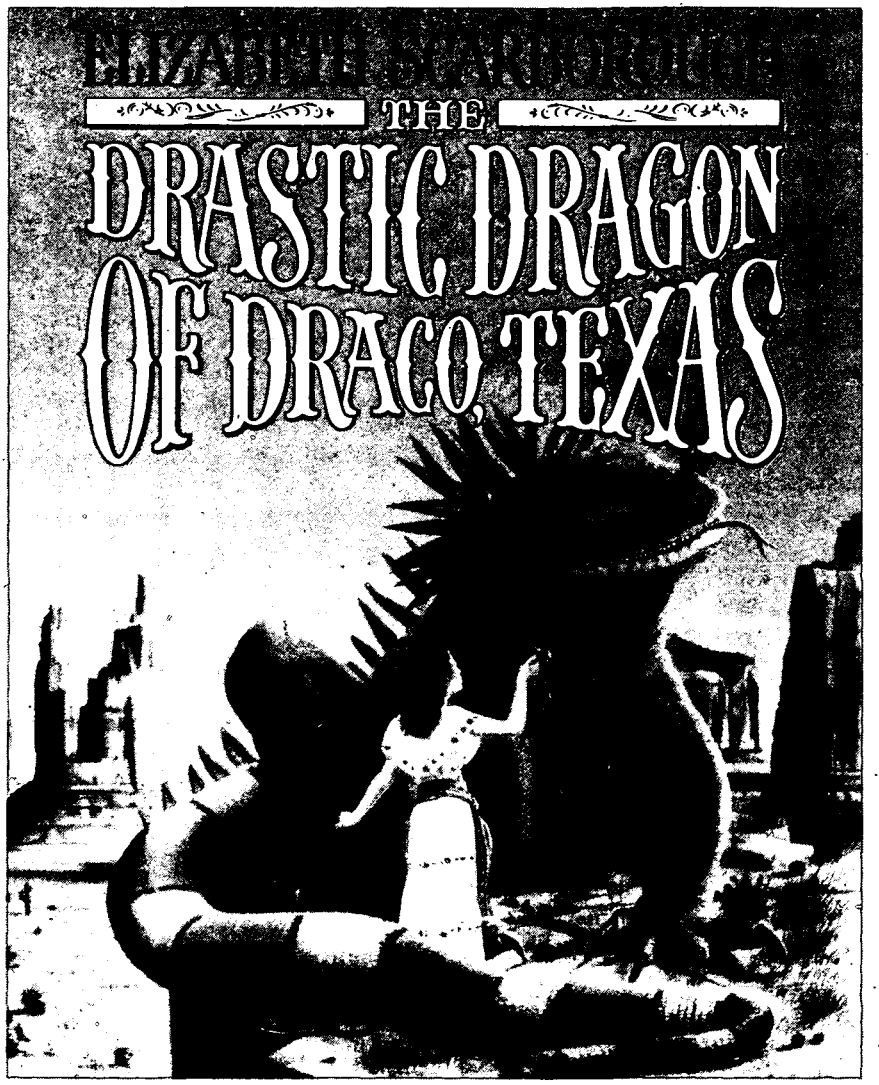

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medieval people, I repeat, had a much broader notion of the name. To this day in the Netherlands, *"India"* may mean the islands of the Malay Archipelago, which used to be called the Netherlands (or Dutch) East Indies; Malaysia and *Ind*onesia, in other words, in Holland to this day are sometimes called "India." This is a relic of the old notion. In the Middle Ages people did not carry maps in their heads or pockets; maps were very rare. They were also very wrong, for that matter. If we reprehend them for thinking of Tartary, Tibet, Turkestan, and most of central Asia as being also *India*—if we think it somewhat silly to have thought of Ethiopia as *India*—and of Burma and Thailand and adjacent countries as *India*—please remember that until very recently Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were by us lumped together under the name *Indo-China*. Medieval Europeans—those of them who thought about such things—did indeed make anyway some attempt to keep the geography of the East straightened out: they, and their maps, referred to *India Before the Ganges* and *India Beyond the Ganges*, and of *First India, Second India*, and *Third India*, for example. And if calling a part of Africa *"India"* still seems silly to us, what about our use of the name *The West Indies*—over four hundred years after our forebears realized that these islands were no part of India at all? As late as the eighteenth century, English-speaking people were calling Polynesians *"Indians,"* and if some of our American aborigines now appropriate the term "Native Americans," it may be well-realized that they are after all really not "Indians." And not even, really, "American Indians."

To sum up, then: in medieval Europe the terms "India" and "the Indies" meant "foreign parts, not in Europe, nor in North Africa, nor in Asia Minor, the Levant, nor any land of the Saracens." More or less.

It might be added, that in Europe quite a lot was known about Asia Minor and the Levant because the Crusades were still going on, and Christian kingdoms then existed in what is now Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and

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Israel.

But the fact that comparatively little was known about "India" did not mean that comparatively little was cared. Quite a bit, as I hope I have explained, was cared.

So. There was "John, Patriarch of India," who appeared and disappeared, rather early in the twelfth century. He certainly had not borne the title of patriarch in his native land; no doubt he had taken advantage of the distance from the facts to build himself up, in much the same fashion as Queen Victoria's Moonshi [Teacher] Abdullah told the Queen that his father was the Head of the Indian Medical Service, when in fact the old man was the dispensing pharmacist at the Agra gaol. This "John" had no direct physical effect either on Europe or on India, but his mere presence had helped prepare the scene; it was now *known* that there were Christians in India, and it was *believed* that some of them were of high rank. —What else had happened?

This: sometime after the departure of that eastern ecclesiastical gentleman and before the arrival of the Letter, a

"'There are in our countries elephants and other animals called dromedaries... the strangest lions of red, green, black, and blue ...Know that we have birds called griffins who can easily carry...a horse into their nest to feed their young... [and] men who feed only on human flesh and they do it for the redemption of their sins.'"

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VIEWPOINT

German bishop visiting in Italy was told by a bishop visiting from Syria that there was a very interesting ruler in Asia, somewhere "beyond Persia and Armenia, in the uttermost East." What made him so interesting? Well, for one thing, he was a Christian. For another, he called himself *rex et sacerdos* . . . priest and king. Also, he had defeated the brother kings of Persia and Media, both Moslems, then he had tried to go west and join up with the Crusading kingdoms there, but he had no boats to cross the Tigris and Euphrates; so, after waiting hopefully (or hopelessly) for those rivers to freeze in order that he and his armies might go over on the ice—back he had gone. Where? Wherever.

The European bishop had asked what kind of Christians the victorious eastern ruler and his followers were; the Syrian bishop replied, doubtless with a deprecating tone of voice, that they were Nestorians. It had been hundreds of years since the doctrine of Nestorius had been declared heretical . . . that the Virgin Mary could not be called "Mother of God" as she was merely the mother of the body in which God dwelt . . . so this was not the best of good news. Still, it was news better than bad. Theologians had known that Asia was full of Nestorians, what a shame, with their absurd insistence that St. Peter had established a church in Asia before going on to Europe, which church was, in fact, the Church of the East, or the Nestorian Church. A shame . . . but . . . still . . . Christians were Christians, and even heretics might be persuaded: the main and common enemy was, after all, Islam . . . which had been trying for hundreds of years to conquer the world. And had often seemed close to success.

Well! There was, afar off, then, a Christian king . . . who was also a priest . . . it was certainly very odd. . . . But that was of course no reason why it should not be true. And if his kingdom lay beyond Persia, why, then, obviously, it lay in India. As Slessarev puts it, "The night cloud of legends around India was slowly lifting, but . . . the lines

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between reality and myth were still indistinct." And so, just as today to many people India, despite its distances and dangers, is the land where spiritual enlightenment may yet be found; so in the 1100s it began to seem that it was in India, despite its dangers and distances, that the physical and political salvation of Christendom might yet be found. For the moment the fighting forces of al-Islam were being "contained" by the Byzantine Emperor, the Holy Roman Emperor, and such warrior-kings as those of France and England: but one never knew if the situation might not change—in which case, suppose there really *was* a possible ally, an enemy of Islam, on the eastern front? Would it not help?

How could it hurt?

The Syrian bishop, Hugh (who was originally from France), had added a few details to interest and convince the indifferent. The great priest-king, said he, was from a very ancient Christian lineage, to wit, the Magian Kings who had brought gifts to Bethlehem. This explains what he was doing way back there beyond Persia. Also: he was very, very rich! Ears pricked up at this, all over Europe and Byzantium and the Christian Levant. He *was? Ohhhh . . .*

This, in brief (or, perhaps, not in so damned much brief) was the background for those three letters for the Pope and the two emperors. I should like perhaps to be able to show you the original in its entirety; but, for one thing, it was in Latin; and it was rather long. It has been translated into English; but the entire translation has not been published; and even the abridged form, which has been, is too long. So let us look at just a few parts of the letter, shall we? Okay.

"John, Priest, by the Grace of God most powerful king over all Christian kings, greetings to the Emperor of Rome [etc. . .] We worship and believe in Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three persons in one Deity. . . . Let it be known to you that we have the highest crown on earth as well as gold, silver, precious stones and strong fortresses. . . . We have under our sway 42 kings who are all mighty and good

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Christians. . . . Know also that we have promised and sworn in our good faith to conquer the Sepulchre of our Lord and the whole Promised Land. . . . Our land is divided into four parts, for there are so many Indias. In Greater India lies the body of the Apostle St. Thomas. . . . And this India is toward the East, for it is near the deserted Babylon. . . . There are in our countries elephants and other animals called dromedaries . . . the strangest lions of red, green, black, and blue . . . [and] wild asses with two little horns who gallop faster than any other animal. Know that we have birds called griffins who can easily carry an ox or a horse into their nest to feed their young . . . [and] men who feed only on human flesh and they do it for the redemption of their sins. This cursed nation . . . is called Gog and Magog. . . . We have bowmen who from the waist up are men, but whose lower part is that of a horse . . . also unicorns . . . a bird called phoenix . . . and many precious stones, such as emeralds, sapphires, rubies . . . wild pepper . . . [. . . .] One of our kings . . . collects from the great King of Israel [i.e. of the "Lost Tribes"] every year 200 horses loaded with precious stones, gold, and silver. . . .

"In front of us there march 40,000 priests and 40,000 knights, followed by 200,000 men on foot, and wagons with provisions, elephants and camels which carry arms and ammunition. We are a priest and we are a king. The walls of our palace are of crystal, the ceiling above is of precious stones and is adorned with stars, and its floor is also of crystal. There need be no windows in this palace, and inside it has 24 columns of gold and precious stones. All the scribes on earth could not report or describe the riches of our palace and chapel. Everything we have written to you is as true as there is God. If you desire from us something that we can fulfill, do not hesitate to ask, for we shall do it gladly. We pray to our Lord to keep you in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen"

Let's take another pause here and use it to have a peek at the three people to whom this curious communication was addressed.

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VIEWPOINT

And as it came out of the East, likely the first copy to reach its destination was the one addressed to the Byzantine Emperor, who was, at that time, Manuel (or Emanuel) Comnenus. His father, emperor before him, was named, by the way, *John*. The Byzantine Empire (a name, by the way, which it never used, regarding itself to the end as *the* Roman Empire), though nowhere as large as it had been during the time of, say, Constantine, or even Justinian, was still far larger than it was to be at the time of its destruction by the Turks. Manuel to be sure fought the Turks . . . but even more he fought his fellow Christians. And they, *him*. He fought Sicily, then a Norman kingdom; he fought the Venetians, the Serbs, and the Hungarians; he captured Corfu, and part of southern Italy, and Dalmatia; and he defeated the Christian minor monarch Count Raymond of Antioch in Syria. *The Encylopedia Britannica* says:

> In spite of his military prowess Manuel achieved but in a slight degree his object of restoring the East Roman Empire. His victories were counterbalanced by numerous defeats. . . . The expense of keeping up his mercenary establishment put a severe strain upon the financial resources of the state. The subsequent rapid collapse of the Byzantine Empire was largely due to his brilliant but unproductive reign.

The Holy Roman Empire, so-called, was then ruled by Frederick I, called Barbarossa because of his red beard (this is *not* Barbarossa the Barbary pirate, who lived long later). His realm (of which we are perhaps bored to hear again that Voltaire said it was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire), its boundaries, and its composition were about as firm as mud; and Frederick spent most of his reign trying to make them anyway somewhat firmer. This involved him in wars in Germany, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, and again, Italy—in the course of one of his Italian campaigns he captured and sacked Rome. Despite this minor difference of opinion with the Pope, Frederick was a staunch child of the

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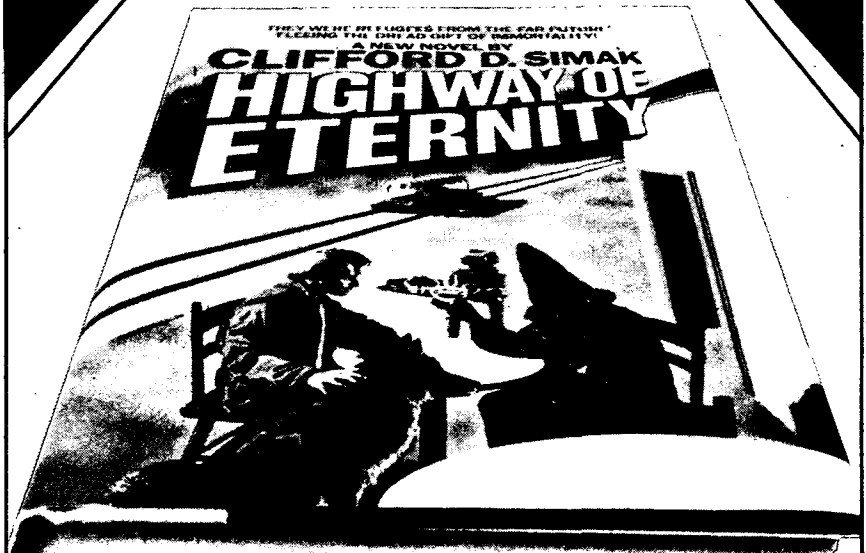

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VIEWPOINT

Church, joined the Third Crusade, and was drowned whilst en route to smite the Saracens. Or so some said. Others, on the other hand, said he wasn't dead at all, just sleeping, in a cave somewhere in the German mountains, waiting to be called. One historian says that Frederick's "power rested upon his earnest and commanding personality . . . and the care with which he exacted feudal dues from his dependents."

Which leaves the Pope.

This was Alexander III, called "one of the outstanding popes in history" and "First of the great lawyer-popes." Although occupied in troubles ranging from the murder of Thomas à Becket to no less than three antipopes, he managed to stay afloat and is considered to have had a successful reign. "His merits and moral stature were recognized even by his adversaries"—among whom, usually, was the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa himself. But they kissed and made up.

Trying to state briefly something, anything, which all three had in common, I seize hastily upon this one: none of them was able to stay in one place permanently during his reign. Unsettled conditions did not permit. Hence it is entirely possible that not one of the three actually received the Letter from Prester John at the time it was delivered. There is no record, or even tradition, that either the Eastern or the Western Emperor even answered it: perhaps neither one was able to think up a claim upon Prester John's lands. However, we have a copy of the reply of the Pope. Yes, he did reply; it only took him about 12 years . . . some say, 17. It is a very interesting, if very cautious, reply: perhaps the most interesting thing is that it seems to have been addressed to the wrong Prester John. —How many were there? Since there was an antipope, was there also, so to speak, an AntiPrester John? A Prester AntiJohn? No. We will get to this, by and by.

One does wonder, if either emperor had replied, what would the reply have been like? What would any letter from either? I do not have their correspondence, and can but guess: in the case of

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the Byzantine, half of it would be taken up with titles; for Manuel not only retained every title of every predecessor, but he invented some new ones as well . . . and half of the other half would have been taken up with the theology which has been called Byzantine not alone referring to origin but to complexity. As for the letters of Frederick, I imagine them to have been commonly succinct; "Send 5,000 ducats or I'll tear out your toenails"; something like that. And of course each imperial ruler would have written at length about the prospect of marriage as a means of alliance not only matrimonial but political: as a matter of fact, both Frederick and Manuel did wind up as some sort of in-law to each other. I forget just how. It was, probably, of Byzantine complexity.

In the end, several centuries later, Byzantium fell, and ended with an immense and tragic bang: the Imperial House of Comnenus in Trebizond and the Imperial House of Paleologus in Constantinople. The Holy Roman Imperium lasted for centuries more, having finally transformed matrimony into a means of acquisition never before known; motto, *Let others wage warfare; thou, O happy Hapsburgs, marry.* The happy Hapsburgs' rule ended, however, not with a bang but a whimper as they trotted out the back gate of the Vienna palace garden one night in 1918. (I, very much later, saw the tomb of Charles Hapsburg, the last Austrian Emperor, on the island of Madeira. It was in an appropriate state of disrepair.) In that same year of 1918 the last other semisuccessor to the Holy Roman Empire, the German Emperor William of Hohenzollern, hopped the train to Holland, where he spent the next twenty-one years chopping down trees which he had planted for the purpose. One wonders if he often or ever thought of the motto of his own ancestors: *Thou shalt want ere I shall want.* There is certainly an evil genius of simplicity in those lines.

But, back to the twelfth century and the Letter from Prester John; if two of the three to whom the Letter was addressed failed to answer it and

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if the third one, who did, took half a generation to do so, it could hardly have been very important: right? *Wrong.* Wrong for the right reasons, and right for the wrong reasons. It was very important; though, it has to be said, less for fact than for fancy. It was as important for what it did not contain, also, as for what it did. So, as we cannot, alas, hear the original words of this Letter, let us hear some original words from something which paved the way for it. I've said that Bishop Hugh from Syria had spoken with someone I've referred to only as "a German bishop." This was in fact Bishop Otto of Freising, described by Slessarev as "one of the great historians of the Middle Ages," and this part appears in Book VII of his *Chronicle.* The translation is by Charles Mierow.

Bishop Hugh of Jabala in Syria began by complaining that the Patriarch of Antioch and the mother-in-law of Count Raymond "did not share properly the spoils taken from the Saracens." He complained, in fact, to the Pope . . . who must have shrugged a patient papal shrug. Emperors and patriarchs the Pope could perhaps handle; but who could handle mothers-in-law? Otto then dipped his quill in the inkwell, and went on to write:

"Bishop Hugh related also that not many years before a certain John, a king and priest who dwells beyond Persia and Armenia in the uttermost East and, with all his people, is a Christian but a Nestorian, made war on the brother kings of Persians and Medes . . . and stormed Ecbatana (the seat of their kingdom). . . . When the aforesaid kings met him with an army . . . a battle ensued which lasted for three days, since both parties were willing to die rather than turn in flight. Prester John, for so they are accustomed to call him, putting the Persians to flight with dreadful carnage, finally emerged victorious. He said that after this victory the aforesaid John moved his army to the aid of the Church in Jerusalem, but that when he had reached the River Tigris [he] was unable to transport his army across that river by any device . . . the continued mild weather

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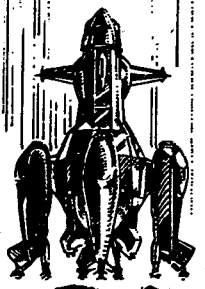

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VIEWPOINT

"Suppose we were told that on . . . Mars lived a race of human beings who were vigorously anticommunist and who possessed the means of creating energy easily and cheaply. . . . Would not millions want to believe it? Suppose in addition we were informed that these men . . . were descended from the inhabitants of Atlantis and had been scouting the earth in flying saucers: multitudes would believe it."

preventing [the river from freezing] . . . because of the unfamiliar climate he was forced to turn home. It is said that he is a lineal descendent of the Magi, of whom mention is made in the Gospel, and that, ruling over the same peoples whom they governed, he enjoys such great glory and wealth that he uses no scepter save one of emerald. Inflamed by the example of his fathers who came to adore Christ in his manger, he had planned to go to Jerusalem but by reasons aforesaid he was prevented. So men say. But enough of this."

If the cautious note indicated by *So men say* belongs properly to Bishop Otto or to Bishop Hugh, or both, *¿quién sabe*? But the element of, almost, impatience, indicated by the *But enough of this* is certainly purely Bishop Otto's. He had, after all, other things to write down beyond whatever pretty prattle came from the uttermost East. Otto was not just a plain bishop; he was the grandson of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV; and his mother, by her first marriage, was the grandmother of the then-

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Emperor Frederick. So Otto was, shall we say, very well-connected; and in his *But enough of this* lies perhaps a clue to the reason why Frederick did nothing in the matter of the Letter of Prester John when it subsequently came. Had Bishop Otto been more interested, perhaps the Emperor would have been more interested. It has been said of the Biblical commentator Lyra that, "Had Lyra never fiddled, Luther had not danced." Otto, in the matter of Prester John, never fiddled. Perhaps he didn't care for the tune.

Well, well, what truth if any may lie in this report at third or twenty-third hand? The bishops met in the year 1145. Had there been any big battles in the few years preceding then? Had there in particular been *one* very big battle? There sure had. Somewhere near the then-great city of Samarkand (whither the poet James Elroy Flecker's Hassan was to take the Golden Road), in the year 1141, there had been an immense battle. The news had taken only four years to reach Europe, which was not bad for those days, particularly considering the distance; for Samarkand is nearer to China than to Rome: it is 2,000 miles from Syria alone. It is hardly a surprise to learn that some of the details had been garbled in transition. For one thing, there were no "brother kings of Persians and Medes" involved; the vanquished was Sultan Sanjar, ruler of the Seljuk Turks—of the same race, perhaps of a different branch, as was Saladin, the famed King of the Saracens during the Third Crusade (which also, of course, involved Richard the Lion-hearted). If Sultan Sanjar was the vanquished, who, then, was the victor? We are told that this was someone of whom we would not ordinarily have heard, one Yeh-lu Ta-shih, "the founder of the Kara-Khitai . . . Empire in Central Asia." *Oh.*

Assuming that Bishop Hugh's account was correct, then Yeh-lu Ta-shih must have been Prester John. Except that, for one thing, we have already seen that Bishop Hugh's account was not, in all details so far, correct. What does Kara (or Qara)-Khitai mean? Well, it means "Black

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Cathay" . . . in fact, the name Khitai is the origin of the name Cathay, which we know, if we know it at all, chiefly in connection with Marco Polo, who came later. To us, Cathay is China. But that is only because at the time of Marco's visit, China was under the rule of a non-Chinese dynasty: Kublai Khan, Polo's magnanimous host, was the grandson of Genghis Khan, the Mongolian conqueror.

The name, Yeh-lu Ta-shih, is, clearly, an attempt on the part of the Chinese to assimilate into the Chinese tongue what to them must have been some very barbarous syllables. I regret that I cannot tell you what his name really was, in the idiom of Kara-Khitai, for my knowledge of the idiom of Kara-Khitai is limited, I am afraid, to the words *Kara-Khitai*. I can, however, tell you this much: in the Turkic and Tatar tongues, *kara* means *black*. (Possibly they flew a black banner. Why? Why not?) Either the victorious nation was related, by blood or by language (not the same thing at all) to the Turks or Tatars, or else the name of their nation, like the name of their ruler, is transmitted (and perhaps transmuted) to us via the medium of yet another alien idiom. "An enigma wrapped in a riddle, hidden in a mystery." —Which, come to think of it, is as good a summing-up of the whole matter of Prester John as we are likely to find.

Only maybe not.

Okay; if the victorious chieftan was, as Bishop Hugh said, none other than P.J., then he must have been, also, a Nestorian. That is (leaving aside the maybe over-emotional judgment of the Council of Nicea, or whichever), a Christian. But Slessarev says that "There is not a single historical source to confirm it." And he adds, "on the contrary, the Chinese sources leave no doubt that he was a Buddhist." *God* knows. However, this is not necessarily the last word. "The Chinese sources" have also been known to be wrong. Furthermore, he might have been originally or transiently a Buddhist, and have been at one time converted to Christianity in its Nestorian form. And if so—that is, if he had been converted—it is not all that improbable he would have been

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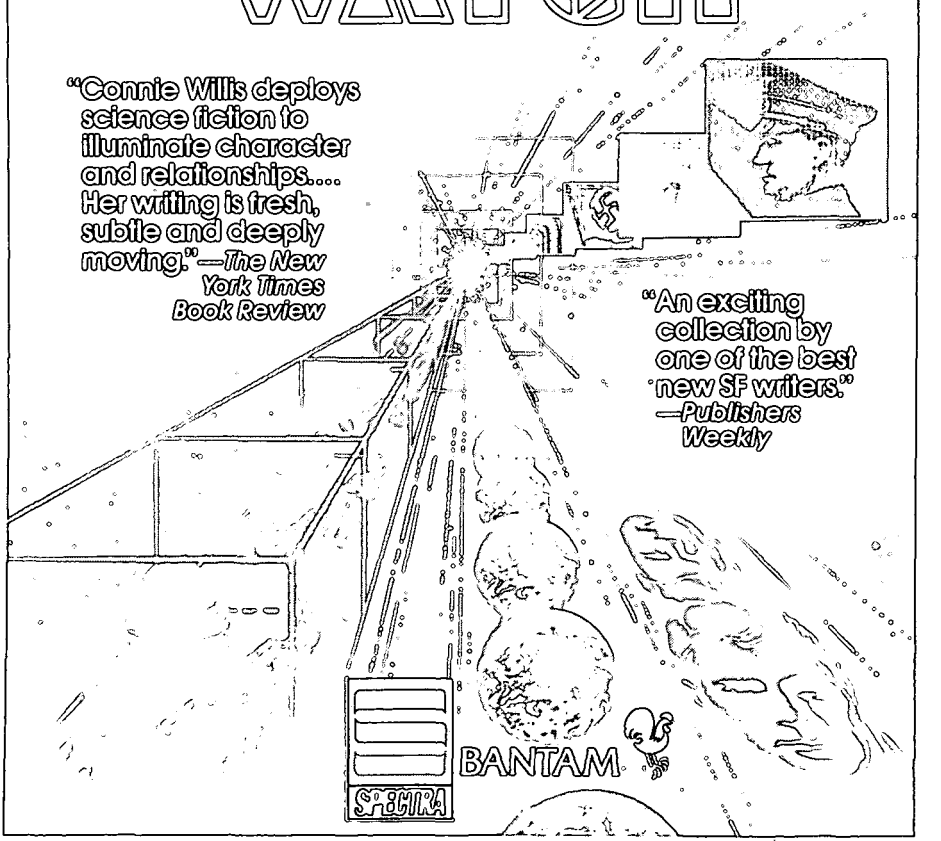

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given the baptismal name of *John*: this was a very common name for converts, particularly in the East, for, after all, St. John was an evangelist. However. The fact . . . or, rather, the non-fact . . . remains: there is no proof. There isn't really even any evidence. There is only a possibility.

Since I do not have the translation of the full text of the original Letter of Prester John . . . in fact, I do not even have the full text, *un*translated . . . in fact, it is merely one of the questions concerning this immensely curious document in which language its text was originally composed . . . therefore I shall next cite an abstract of the original (so-called) as contained in the *Britannica*. And we shall take it from there.

> "The letter dealt at length with the wonders of his empire. It was his desire to visit the Holy Sepulchre with a great host, and to subdue the enemies of the Cross. Seventy-two kings, reigning over his many kingdoms, were his tributaries. His empire extended over the three Indies, including that Farther India, where lay the body of St. Thomas, to the sunrising, and back again down the slope to the ruins of Babylon and the tower of Babel. All the wild beasts and monstrous creatures commemorated in current legend were to be found in his dominions, as well as all the wild and eccentric races of men of whom strange stories were told [the language here is of course that of the *Britannica*'s unnamed author, and not that of the Letter] including those unclean nations whom Alexander the Great walled up among the mountains of the North and who were to come forth at the latter day—and so were the Amazons and the Brahmans. His dominions contained the monstrous ants that dug gold and the fish that gave the purple ["the fish that gave the purple" refers to the shellfish *murex*, from which the famous Tyrian dye was made—his dominions] and produced all manner of precious stones and all the famous aromatics. Within them was found the Fountain of Youth, the pebbles of which give light,

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restore sight, and render the possessor invisible; the Sea of Sand was there, stored with fish of wondrous savor, and the River of Stones was there also, besides a subterranean stream whose sands were full of gems. ["... *where Alph the sacred river ran, / through caverns measureless to man* ..."? —Coleridge] His territory produced the worm called 'salamander,' which lived in fire and which wrought itself an incombustible envelope [asbestos] from which were manufactured robes for the presbyter, which were washed in flaming fire.

"In war 13 great crosses made of gold were carried in wagons before Prester John as his standards, and each was followed by 10,000 knights and 100,000 footmen [i.e., infantry]. There were no poor in his dominions, no thief or robber, no lies, and no vices. His palace was built after the plan of that which St. Thomas erected for the Indian king Gondopharus. Before it was a marvelous mirror erected on a many-storied pedestal; in this speculum he could discern every thing that went on throughout his dominions, and detect conspiracies. [Have we here a hint of an extra early telescope? Likely an echo of the Pharos at Alexandria, and the legends of Vergil Magus.]

"Prester John was served by 7 kings at a time, by 60 dukes and 365 counts; 12 archbishops sat on his right hand, and 20 bishops on his left, besides the patriarch of St. Thomas, the protopope of the Sarmagantians (Samarcand?), and the archprotopope of Susa, where the royal residence was. Should it be asked why, with all this power and splendor, he calls himself merely 'presbyter,' this is because of his humility, and because it was not fitting for one whose chamberlain was a bishop and king, and whose chief cook was an abbot and king, to be called by such titles as these."

And so on.

To us, reading this in an age which has skepticism as its very basis and believes in invisibility pebbles, the Fountain of Youth and fireproof worms and so on, no more than in fairy tales, all this is gaudy nonsense; we ask, "How could anyone have believed it?" But eight hundred years ago the view was different. The gaudy

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bits were taken as just so many realistic details, and the more familiar they might be from other reports, the more they disposed towards the acceptance and belief of this one.

Frederick the Western Emperor might not have accepted and Manuel the Eastern Emperor might not have believed; others did. Why? If I had to give a modern parallel, I would be driven to invent one. Suppose we were told that on the other side of Mars lived a race of human beings who were vigorously anticommunist and who possessed the means of creating energy easily and cheaply by a secret formula which they were eager to put at our disposal. Would not many believe it? Would not millions want to believe it? Suppose in addition we were informed that these men from Mars were descended from the inhabitants of Atlantis and had been scouting the earth in flying saucers: multitudes would believe it.

Now, the accounts of all the wonders of the kingdom or empire of Prester John can be traced to tales current long before the Letter—to the medieval legends of the supposed discoveries of Alexander the Great, for example. Others, such as the fire-proof worm which secreted asbestos like silk, and such as the unicorn, had been circulating for centuries. Since none of these really existed, it is easy to draw the not illogical conclusion that Prester John did not really exist, either. Nor did he . . . anyway, not as described in the Letter. However. The Pope, as we have said, did not rustle up his secretary with the words, "Take a letter to Prester John. *Dear Jack . . .*" but, evidently, eventually, the Pope, old Alexander III, did decide to send a reply. Two manuscript copies survive, one in Cambridge and one in Paris; unlike the Letter itself, these are dated (September 22, 1177); and begin, *Carissimo in Christo filio Johanni, illustro et magnifico indorum regi.* This, with the valor of ignorance, I translate as *Most beloved in Christ, son John, illustrious and magnificent king of India.* This data, by the way, is from the *EB* again, and so, from the *EB*, I march on. Again.

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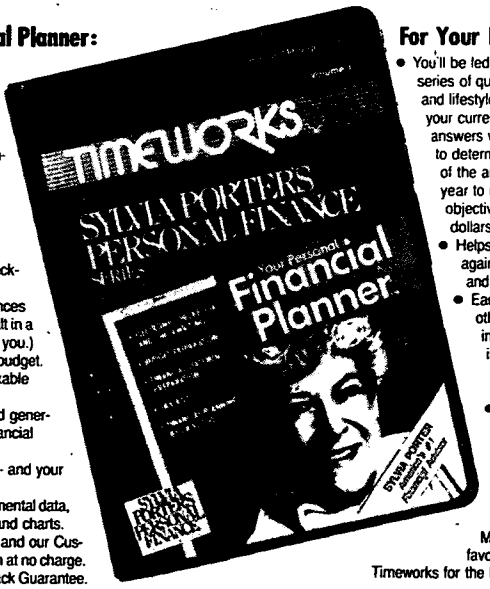

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VIEWPOINT

> "The Pope recites how he had heard of the monarch's Christian profession, diligence in good works and piety by various narrators and common report, but also more particularly from his physician and confidant Philip, who had received information from honorable persons of the monarch's kingdom . . ."

What has been happening? Has the pope in the intervening years perhaps concluded that "King Gandaforas of India" was, as has been said, none other than Gaspar, who, along with Balthazar and Melchior, constituted *los reyes magos?*, the Magian kings? Did someone tell the Pope, concerning the emerald sceptre of Prester John, that in the Sixth Voyage of our other old friend, Sindbad the Sailor, there is a report of the King of Ceylon, right next to our own India, who had carried before him "a great mace of gold, at the top of which [was] an emerald a span in length, and of the thickness of a thumb?" Perhaps. *Some*body seems to have told the Pope *some*thing. . . . Who was Doctor Philip, the Pope's "physician and confidant"? I have no idea. Neither has anyone else. Well, well, what else did Doctor Philip tell the Pope . . . perhaps of some evening when, tired of all those quarrelsome bishops, margraves, antipopes, greedy old mothers-in-law of equally greedy counts—perhaps on such an evening, the Pope having taken off his robes and his tiara and put his tired old feet in a basin of hot water, and maybe after having been given something nice for his stomach, perhaps Doctor Philip looked up and said, "Ah, and by the way, Holy Father, guess what I was told today by some honorable persons from the Kingdom of Prester John?"

What would have been the papal reply, other than, "Tell me. What?" And Doctor Philip, glad to be the bearer of reasonably good news, proceeded to tell him. As follows.

Prester John, it seemed, evidently not in the least miffed at having had no reply all these long years to his nice Letter, was very desirous to prove his piety by establishing "a church in Rome, and an altar at

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Jerusalem." And, just in case the Pope had misgivings as to, was he, Prester John, really a good Christian . . . that is, of course, a good Catholic . . . so let the Pope send him some good Catholic instruction.

Moved perhaps by some sudden impulse, moved perhaps by considerations to us unknowë, the Pope (according to this manuscript) decided to send *Philip* to impart the instruction. Was it to be entirely a religious instruction? Did the Pope intend to send his own physician and confidant over miles and miles of golden sand and frightful deserts full of unicorns, griffins, salamanders, and multi-colored lions and dromedaries, solely for Philip to catechize a dusky king there at the ends of the world (*Who Made the World? God made the world*) . . .? Or, the Pope being at that time a secular as well as a sacred ruler, were there perhaps other instructions? Perhaps. It might be so. I do not know. I know, though, that the papal letter advises that Prester John send back sealed replies by trustworthy persons. And then, the Holy Father perhaps having sent for the copy of *the* Letter from Prester John to refresh his memory, then the Pope concludes, ". . . the less thou vauntest of thy wealth and power, the more readily shall we regard thy wishes. . . ." Teach *him*. . . .

Off goes Philip. Never to be heard from again. Or, at any rate, not in any further manuscripts of which we know or have ever heard. However. *Where* did Philip go? Observe that the Pope doesn't complain that the address is vague, or that it will be the Devil's own task getting there. The Pope seems entirely satisfied that Phil can get there from here. It is of course possible that Doctor Philipus was like US Army Lieutenant Rowan, who, being told, during the Spanish-American War in 1898, "Take this message to Garcia," and, knowing only that Garcia was a general somewhere in Cuba and in the rebellion against the Spanish Crown, said merely, "Yes sir." And took it. And took off. (Alas, by the time he had waded through half the swamps in Cuba to find Garcia and give him the message, Garcia said he didn't want it; but that's another story.

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VIEWPOINT

I saw Rowan's picture in the papers, about 1935. The Army had finally decided to give him a medal; Rowan, who was in a wheelchair, looked very much as though he would much rather have had a pint of rye. —Garcia, by the way, had, literally, a hole in his head. He kept it plugged with cotton.) No, but, on the whole, the tone of the papal communication is that the Pope was not in any doubt about Prester John's address.

And so perhaps we shouldn't be, either.

What clue do we have, or do we have any, as to just who, or to whom, the Pope thought he was sending the letter? The clue seems to lie in the request for "an altar at Jerusalem." And, some time later, we do not know exactly how much time later, "an altar" was being maintained at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem by a Christian king and emperor who did not live in Europe. Nor, for that matter, in Asia Minor, either. This was none other than the Negus of Abyssinia (later renamed Ethiopia), the King of Kings, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, whose ultimate successor, last to hold that far-off throne, died in this past decade. Haile Selassie.

But this was in Africa! Very well, then, it was in Africa. Have I not told you that, according to medieval geography, that a part of Africa was considered to be a part of India? Prester John was a Christian king, somewhere in India, well, in some one of the three or four places called India. Or the Indies. One of the three or four places was Abyssinia (Ethiopia). And in Ethiopia lived a Christian king. What more did one need? Here you are, Doctor Philip. Accept our apostolic benediction. Have a nice trip. Let us know when you get back. —Clearly a case of mistaken identity; here we have left Prester John having defeated the Saracens in Asia, and the Pope sends off a letter and hints of help . . . to Africa. Is that all there is to it? Not on your tin-type. Prester John of India-in-Asia remains for further discussion. Let us wrap up Prester John of India-in-Africa. The Portuguese were very interested in Africa . . . and

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Mythical Beasties

EDITED BY ISAAC ASIMOV, MARTIN H. GREENBERG, CHARLES G. WAUGH

WITH HEADNOTES BY ISAAC ASIMOV

SIGNET FANTASY

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remained so, until the last decade, by which time no doubt they wished they'd never heard of the place. Eventually they made contact with the Emperor of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). They called him "Prester John." The Emperor was a bit miffed. Said his name was *Jacob*. The Portuguese shrugged: John, Jacob, what's in a name. For years and years, as a result, the maps showed *the Kingdom of the Prester John of the Indies*: in Ethiopia (Abyssinia). But that is another story. Isn't it? Yes it is.

Meanwhile, back to Asia . . . or back to such tales as came out of Asia and into Europe. As for the three recipients of the alleged Letter, the Emperor of the West was drowned, as I have said; the Emperor of the East had died of fever; and Pope Alexander III had died. I don't know of what. And for forty-four years, all was silent. Then news broke like a clap of thunder: Prester John had risen again . . . had returned . . . from wherever he had been . . . or, if not him, his successor . . . also, of course named Prester John, just as all the ancient kings of Egypt were named Pharaoh; a king in Inner Asia was sweeping west and his name was certainly John . . . or, in the old French form, *Jehan* . . . or, well, something like that. He was conquering all the Moslem potentates, so who else could he *be*, if not Prester John? It took the Europeans a while to figure out another answer; you, you lucky people, get it all at once.

It was Jenghis Khan.

Who was no Christian, I am afraid, and certainly no gentleman. But matters did not end there. Not at all. By now everyone in Europe was taking it for granted that there was really a Prester John. The question alone remained: Who else was he? And where?

A monk of the West who had gone east, returned with the intelligence that Prester John bore, in his native tongue, the rather unlovely name of Ung Khan ("Khan," by the way, means "Lord" or "prince"), and was the ally of Genghis. By and by came another monk, Friar William by name; he informed none other than Roger Bacon that in the middle of Asia "there lived

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a Nestorian shepherd . . . a mighty governor over the . . . Christians, following the sect of Nestorius. They called him King John . . ." Friar William said that Ung Khan was not Prester John, Ung Khan was Prester John's *brother*. This is all mighty confusing; for one thing, a shepherd who was a *king*? Well, if he were a Mongol, or a Tartar, and if you want to call someone a "shepherd" whose flocks and herds probably numbered into the scores of thousands . . . And by now, you know, we are into the thirteenth century. Enter Messer Marco Polo. Just to complicate things, *he* says that Unc or Ung Khan *was* Prester John; and he says that he was defeated by Jenghis Khan. He, Marco Polo, also says that the names *Ung* and *Mongol* are merely different forms of the names *Gog* and *Magog*, mentioned in the Bible in the Book of Ezekiel, and the subject of a multitude of legends: the Letter of Prester John, recall, calls them cannibals, "accursed of God;" it was further said . . . But *"enough of this,"* as Bishop Otto puts it.

We are by now in the

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VIEWPOINT

fourteenth century, and one Friar Odoric, yet another of those peripatetic monks, returns from Thither Asia with a report of the Kingdom of Prester John, but with not much of one: It lies "fifty days' journey west of Cathay."

—And then enters none other than Sir John de Mandeville. Sir John, like Gog and Magog, deserves an Adventure all of his own, and perhaps he will get one; meanwhile suffice it to say that Sir John de Mandeville informs us that *he has been in the Kingdom of Prester John!* and piles detail upon detail about that fascinating realm; herewith a few of them:

Having told us that round about the city of Bokhara in Central Asia there are many hippopotami (there are none at all), he says briskly, "From thence go men by many journeyings through the land of Prester John, the great Emperor of Ind. And men clepe [call] his realm the Isle of Pentexoire." How the inland empire became transformed into an island empire, I do not know. Sir John continues, "men dread the long way and the great perils in the sea in those parts." He says that there are "diverse Isles that be about in the Lordship of Prester John." There is a feeling of giddiness which affects diverse people on reading things like this, and one grasps at straws of explanation: perhaps the "Ind" here is the East Indies? which certainly do consist of "diverse Isles." But, skipping the horned men and the dog-headed men and all the ruddy rest of it, let us say very briefly that Sir John de Mandeville, whoever he really was,, really was a magnificent old liar and a literary pirate in spades.

Herewith a fascinating suggestion from the twentieth century: L. Sprague de Camp and Willy Ley have turned up the fact that two Roman Catholic scholars, Stockman and Rowe, had found an old map which pinpoints a certain area in the words, *This is the land of the good King and lord Prester John.* . . . This area is none other than Tibet! John C. Rowe says that "In Tibet we have all the reasonable alleged attributes—the priest-king, or Dalai Lama . . . a perfectly

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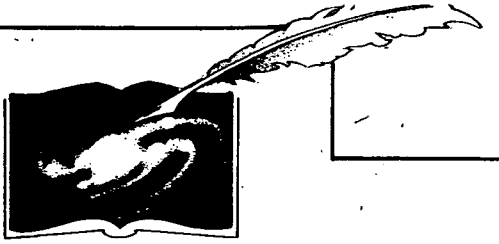

About L. RON HUBBARD's

Writers of the Future Contest

by Algis Budrys

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of $500, $750 and $1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of $4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of $5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

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—Algis Budrys

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organized hierarchy; a well-built, strongly fortified and populous capital, Lhasa, containing . . . thousands of monks. . . ." Rowe admits that there is only one flaw in this identification: ". . . the priests, monks and people are and were Buddhists and not Christians. But travelers might very well confuse the national religion. . . ."

Very well, maybe. Indeed, certain Buddhist practices and ceremonies do so closely resemble certain Christian ones that it has often been suggested that they may be of Christian origin, specifically of Nestorian origin. And, since we have so often met the name of Nestorian in connection with Prester John, let us pause a moment and consider who they are and were, and what if any connection they may have had with the legend of Prester John.

Of the Nestorians, western Christianity knew chiefly that they were heretical and schismatic; which need not concern us, save that, driven out of the Byzantine Empire, they turned their faces to the east: indeed, their name for their church was the Church of the East. Marco Polo found them all the way into China; during the middle ages their fifty dioceses and archdioceses reached across Asia into what is now Peking, or Beijing, once again China's capital. But this did not last; one reason why not was the conquests of Jenghis Khan and other oriental despots, such as Tamurlane. Following the Mongol conquests the Nestorian Church maintained itself chiefly in the mountains of Kurdistan, an area now divided between Turkey, Iraq, and Iran; having vague affiliations with Christian congregations in South India and Ceylon . . . both of them being places, as we have seen, connected with the legend of Prester John. From early in the nineteenth century Christian missionaries from the West worked among these people, who, in order to have a national as well as a religious identity, began to call themselves "Assyrians." One such missionary was an Episcopalian, an American, and after his return to the United States, became the minister or priest of St. John's Episcopal

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Church in Yonkers, New York. And it happens that this is my home town; I was born and raised there.

Because of the presence of this friendly clergyman, and because Yonkers is so near to New York City, many Assyrian emigrants settled right there; almost I might say that I grew up amongst them; Yonkers now has the largest Assyrian community in the USA. Never did I hear from these excellent people the name of Prester John, but I heard many other things from them about their religion and ethnic group: *not* the same. Some of them remained members of the Church of the East, others were Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, or Presbyterians. Time and time again, however, I was told, "My family belongs to the [whichever] church, but we regard Mar Shimon as our leader." Who was Mar Shimon? The words mean *Lord Simon*. Recollect my having mentioned the Nestorian claim that St. Peter had established a Church in Asia before having gone to Europe—recollect that the Gospels refer to him as "Simon called Peter." The Mar Shimon, then, was believed to be the legitimate successor to St. Peter, a claim also made, perhaps more effectively, by the Pope. I believe that the Mar Shimon of my day was the 22nd, and the office, called "Patriarch Catholicos," or Universal Patriarch, "of the Church of the East," i.e. of the Nestorian Church, descended within the one same family, and had for over six hundred years: its organization prior to that time being unknown to me. I say "descended"; the Mar Shimon was celibate, so the patriarchate descended from uncle to nephew. The language of church and people was the eastern form of the Aramaic language, of which Jesus and his contemporaries spoke the western form.

(Remember that "Catholic(os)" in this case does not mean "Roman Catholic." There were and are Roman Catholic "Assyrians," but the Roman Catholic Church prefers to refer to them as "Chaldeans" or "East Syrians." I hope you are all now sufficiently confused.)

So, there in the mountains of Eastern Turkey, Northern Iraq,

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and Western Persia or Iran, dwelt from ancient times a Christian nation ruled by its own patriarch—its own high priest, one might say. Is this not suggestive? Of the struggles for liberty waged to his death by the Mar Shimon during the First World War against the Turks, of the massacres of the Assyrian people by the Turks and Kurds, immense and tragically moving epics might be written. This people in its ancient homeland is now a mere shadow of itself—mind you, I am not speaking of the horrid genocide waged against the modern *Armenians*, of which most of us know something, but against the modern *Assyrians*, of which most of us know nothing. The nephew of the martyred Patriarch, during my younger days, lived in Chicago; and, as Mar Shimon XXII (I think) he was still regarded by some as the religious head of the Assyrian people, and by all as the ethnic head. Thanks to Nestorian friends I was able to read several books printed by them in English: and I realized that, there in the mountains of lower West Central Asia, down to the First World War, these Christian mountaineers lived almost independent of the Sultan of Turkey, under the local rule of hereditary chieftans, much like the Highlanders of Scotland prior to the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie in the eighteenth century. These eastern chieftans, however, were not known as "lairds" (lords). They were known as *malics*.

And *malic* means *king*. . . .

There it was, not only in black and white and by word of mouth, but there were the photographs as well.

I sum it up: in Asia, surrounded by non-Christians, lived a Christian people whose head was a priest, who ruled over Christian kings, and of whom we thus might say that he was—unofficially—an emperor. I submit my case that in the Patriarch Catholicos of the Church of the East, in the Mar Shimon, we have the original of Prester John. Did he, then, or, did one of them, write the Letter? Oh no. Whatever may be unsure about the Letter of Prester John, one thing is sure: it never came from Prester John . . . whoever

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SPECTRA BANTAM

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VIEWPOINT

Prester John was. As Boies Penrose, the learned author of *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance*, says, the legend of Prester John was "the greatest of all geographical myths," and the so-called Letter from Prester John was the "most remarkable of all literary hoaxes." One cannot even call it a forgery: it was a hoax. Who was the hoaxer? A certain (European) Bishop Christopher has been named, without much cause, but no one really knows. Whoever did it, *why* did he do it?

Historians have asked Who and Why . . . but they have asked other historians; they should have asked other writers. It now seems that the Who will never be known, but the Why is easy: the Letter's writer wrote it because he liked writing it; for the fun of it, he wrote it. He wrote it because he enjoyed it. That's why. That's all. It is not widely enough realized that forgers and hoaxers take a pride in their inventions quite apart from anything tangible which may be gained from them. The Letter from Prester John—it is a sort of hodge-podge cobbled together from old legends, to which were added certain wishful thoughts. It is, in short, a short story without a plot: in J. L. Borges' genius-simple word, it is a Fiction.

And that is all that we can say.

I've said that, failing to find Prester John in Asia (because they failed to look in the right part of Asia), European Christendom sought him in Africa; and, in a way, in the person of the Emperor of Ethiopia, they found him. Meanwhile, what of that other and unknown Prester John, the Mar Shimon, Patriarch Catholicos of the Church of the East, who came to live in America, almost ignored by the country and the world? He moved to San Jose, California, the climate of which was nearer to his old homeland than that of Chicago. And there, several years ago, at the age of sixty, he threw more than six hundred years, perhaps almost two thousand years of traditional celibacy out the window, and married. The marriage produced one child, a girl; in a state of intense and fanatical excitement down from Canada came one of his outraged

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followers and shot him dead. In one sense, we may say that Prester John, in the person of the Emperor Haile Selassie, died the prisoner of a revolution during this past decade. And, in another sense, we may say that Prester John, in the person of the Patriarch Mar Shimon, a freer man than he had ever been, in the same decade died by the hand of an assassin on a sunny street in a suburb of San Francisco.

"Decay," said the Buddha, "is inherent in all component things."

Or: Everything which has a beginning has an end.

Even Prester John. ●

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VIEWPOINT

One of the "books" mentioned turned up just in time to make publication. It had lain long hidden in a crypt, and when I touched it the binding fell apart: the text however remains quite clear. I give the biblio information in full: *The Flickering Light of Asia*, or the *Assyrian Nation and Church* | by | Rev. Joel E. Werda, B.D. | *Reviser of the Assyrian Bible. Author of the English-Assyrian Dictionary. The Assyrian-English Dictionary.* | *The Editor and Publisher* | *of the Assyrian American Chronicle.* Published by *The Author.* Copyright 1924 by Joel E. Werda.

I quote from the Introduction by Thomas Burgess:

> "For many centuries a mighty Christian Church loomed large on the pages of ecclesiastical history. This Church was the Church of the "dwellers in Mesopotamia," of the famous university of Edessa, of the Missionaries to the farthest corners of India and China. The remnant of the Assyrians are the remnant of this Church. [. . .] Like a thin wedge, the rightful domains of the Christian Assyrians extend north of Mosul between Mohammedan Kurdistan and Persia. Here before the war the Patriarch-Prince, Church and State united, ruled his Christian people in all simplicity, respected alike by Mohammedan and Christian. Today part of the race has been massacred [. . .] To allow this nation to be wiped off the pages of history ought to be unthinkable."

Page 7 consists of a photograph of thirteen men clad in robes and baggy trousers and turbans and with curved knives in their sashes. Caption: "A group of the Mountain Assyrian Malicks [literally, *kings!*], who served as the advisers of Mar Shimon Benyamin during the war [i.e. World War I]. They are the chiefs of the independent tribes of Assyria." Or, at any rate, they were. The story of how, under the leadership of their Patriarch—subsequently "cowardly assasinated by a Kurdish Chieftan through the conspiracy of the Persian Tabriz authorities"—fought both Kurds and Turks is, if lacking the

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fictive splendors of "Prester John," dramatic enough . . . and far more terrible.

I should be surprised at how closely the reverend author comes to my own conclusion. "When the power of the Chaliphs declined, the Nestorians were sensible to some extent of the approaching calamity which was to befall their missions under the Tartar rulers. They had, indeed, as we have already seen, extended their missionary work as far as Tartary, and established Metropolitan Sees there. The story of Prester John is perhaps too familiar to be related; but whether its genuineness be admitted or not, it shows beyond any doubt that the Nestorian missionaries received the favors of the so-called converted ruler. The probability is that, some of the successors of the Unk Kahn [sic] embraced Christianity. . . ."

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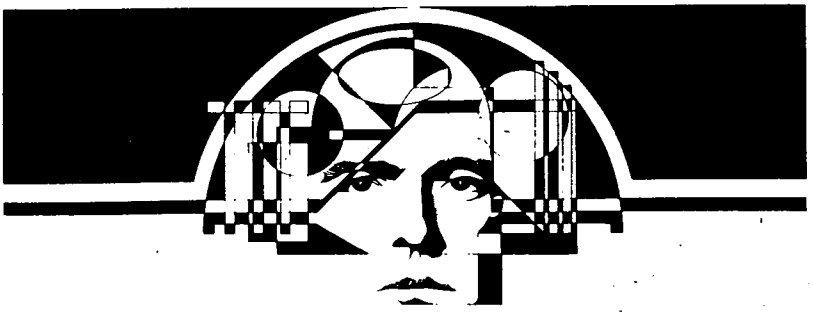
MARTIN GARDNER

THE VANISHING PLANK



The Black Tube, known to physicists as a John Wheeler "worm hole," has its entrance inside the black hole that spins at the center of the Milky Way Galaxy. The Tube extends along a fourth spatial coordinate through an infinity of parallel universes that are adjacent to one another like the leaves of a monstrous four-dimensional book. At the Tube's entrance is Aleph-Null Inn, named for the smallest of Georg Cantor's infinite hierarchy of transfinite numbers. (Aleph-null counts the set of integers: 1,2,3,4, . . .)

The Inn has an aleph-null infinity of rooms. This leads to many curious paradoxes, some of which have been discussed previously in this column. As you might expect, the Inn offers entertainment of a sort never seen in this world. There are, for example, skilled dancers, some with 20 legs, capable of executing an infinity of steps which get faster and faster, allowing the dance routine to be completed in a finite time. And there are marvelous singers, some with two mouths which allow them to sing duets with themselves. They enthrall audiences with "fractal" songs. These are melodies in which an infinity of notes are, like the dance steps, concluded in finite periods of time.

Aleph the Great, a magician who appears regularly at the Inn's cab-

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aret, specializes in illusions based on infinite sets. We will consider one of his favorites—the incredible vanishing plank.

The plank is one meter long, six centimeters wide, and half a centimeter thick. It is not made of wood, but of a substance utterly unlike any in our galaxy. Here all matter is composed of discrete particles. But the Great Aleph's plank, made in another universe, is a dense continuum of infinitely divisible matter, more like the matter in Aristotle's physics than in the physics of the Greek atomists.

The Great Aleph begins his illusion by first causing the plank to float in midair above the stage. Then, using a cutting device that operates with ever-accelerating speed, the Great Aleph removes ¼ of the plank from its center. The removed piece is discarded. He next removes a section of length 1/16 from the middle of each of the two remaining pieces. There are now four disconnected pieces. From the middle of each, a section of length 1/64 is taken. Thus at each step a section one-fourth of the previously removed length is taken from the center of all remaining sections, and this procedure is continued to infinity. The illustration shows the plank in cross section. The black portions are those sections removed during the first three steps.

THE MUTILATED PLANK

The first step takes away ¼ of the plank. The second step removes 1/16 + 1/16 or ⅛ of the original plank. The third step removes 1/64 + 1/64 + 1/64 + 1/64 or 1/16 of the original plank. The total amounts removed at each step form the infinite series ¼ + ⅛ + 1/16 + 1/32 + . . . , which has a sum of ½. Each step is completed in a time interval that is the same as the amount of plank removed at that step. The first step takes ¼ minute, the second step takes ⅛ minute, the third 1/16, and so on. Therefore the cutting task is completed in exactly half a minute. At the end of that time exactly half of the original plank has been removed.

Has the plank vanished or is it still there? For a proof it has vanished, turn to page 95.

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VIDEO STAR

by Walter Jon Williams

art: Gary Freeman

Walter Jon Williams lives in New Mexico. He is the author of *Ambassador of Progress*, *Knight Moves*, and *Hardwired* (which is just out in hardcover from Tor Books). "Video Star" marks his second appearance in *IAsfm*.

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Ric could feel the others closing in. They were circling outside the Falcon Quarter as if on midsummer thermals, watching the Cadillacs with glittering raptor eyes, occasionally swooping in to take a little nibble at Cadillac business, Cadillac turf, Cadillac sources. Testing their own strength as well as the Cadillac nerves, applying pressure just to see what would happen, find out if the Cadillacs still had it in them to respond. . . .

Ric knew the game well: he and the other Cadillacs had played it five years before, up and down the streets and datanets of the Albaicín, half-grown kids testing their strength against the gangs entrenched in power, the Cruceros, the Jerusalem Rangers, the Piedras Blancas. The older gangs seemed slow, tentative, uncertain, and when the war came the Cadillacs won in a matter of days: the others were too entrenched, too visible, caught in a network of old connections, old associations, old manners. The young Cadillacs, coming up out of nowhere, found their own sources, their own products and connections, and in the end they and their allies gutted the old boys' organization, absorbing what was still useful and letting the rest die along with the remnants of the Cruceros, Rangers, and Blancas, the bewildered survivors who were still looking for a remaining piece of turf on which to make their last stand.

At the time Ric had given the Cadillacs three years before the same thing started happening to them, before their profile grew too high and the next generation of snipers rose in confidence and ability. The Cadillacs had in the end lasted five years, and that wasn't bad. But, Ric thought, it was over.

The other Cadillacs weren't ready to surrender. The heat was mounting, but they thought they could survive this challenge—hold out another year or two. They were dreaming, Ric thought.

During the dog days of summer, people began to die. Gunfire echoed from the pink walls of the Alhambra. Networks disintegrated. Allies disappeared. Ric made a proposition to the Cadillacs for a bank to be shared with their allies, a fund to keep the war going. The Cadillacs in their desperation agreed.

Ric knew then it was time to end it, that the Cadillacs had lost whatever they once had. If they agreed to a proposition like this, their nerve and their smarts were gone.

So there was a last meeting, Ric of the Cadillacs, Mares of the Squires, Jacob of the Last Men. Ric walked into the meeting with a radar-aimed dart gun built into the bottom of his briefcase, each dart filled with a toxin that would stop the heart in a matter of seconds. When he walked out it was with a money spike in his pocket, a stainless steel needle

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tipped with silicon. In the heart of the silicon was data representing over eighty thousand Seven Moons dollars, ready for deposit into any electric account into which he could plug the needle.

West, Ric thought. He'd buy into an American condecology somewhere in California and enjoy retirement. He was twenty-two years old.

He began to feel sick in the Tangier to Houston suborbital shuttle, a crawling across his nerves, pinpricks in the flesh. By the time he crossed the Houston port to take his domestic flight to L.A. there were stabbing pains in his joints and behind his eyes. He asked a flight attendant for aspirin and chased the pills with American whiskey.

As the plane jetted west across Texas, Ric dropped his whiskey glass and screamed in sudden pain. The attendants gave him morphine analogue but the agony only increased, an acid boiling under his skin, a flame that gutted his body. His vision had gone and so had the rest of his senses except for the burning knowledge of his own pain. Ric tried to tear his arms open with his fingernails, pull the tortured nerves clean out of his body, and the attendants piled on him, holding him down, pinning him to the floor of the plane like a butterfly to a bed of cork.

As they strapped him into a stretcher at the unscheduled stop at Flagstaff, Ric was still screaming, unable to stop himself. Jacob had poisoned him, using a neurotoxin that stripped away the myelin sheathing on his nerves, leaving them raw cords of agonized fiber. Ric had been in a hurry to finish his business and had only taken a single sip of his wine: that was the only thing that had saved him.

2.

He was months in the hospital in Flagstaff, staring out of a glass wall at a maze of other glass walls—office buildings and condecologies stacked halfway to Phoenix—flanking the silver alloy ribbon of an expressway. The snows fell heavily that winter, then in the spring melted away except for patches in the shadows. For the first three months he was completely immobile, his brain chemically isolated from his body to keep the pain away while he took an endless series of nerve grafts, drugs to encourage nerve replication and healing. Finally there was physical therapy that had him screaming in agony at the searing pain in his reawakened limbs.

At the end there was a new treatment, a new drug. It dripped into his arm slowly via an IV and he could feel a lightness in his nerves, a humming in his mind. For some reason even the air seemed to taste better. The pain was no worse than usual and he felt better than he had since walking out of the meeting back in Granada with the money spike in his pocket.

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"What is that stuff?" he asked, next time he saw the nurse.

The nurse smiled. "Everyone asks that," he said. "Genesios Three. We're one of the few hospitals that has the security to distribute the stuff."

"You don't say."

He'd heard of the drug while watching the news. Genesios Three was a new neurohormone, developed by the orbital Pink Blossom policorp, that could repair almost any amount of nerve damage. As a side effect it built additional neural connections in the brain, raising the I.Q., and made people high. The hormone was rare because it was very complex and expensive to synthesize, though the gangs were trying. On the west coast lots of people had died in a war for control of the new black labs. On the street it was called Black Thunder.

"Not bad," said Ric.

The treatment and the humming in Ric's brain went on for a week. When it was over he missed it. He was also more or less healed.

3.

The week of Genesios therapy took fifteen thousand dollars out of Ric's spike. The previous months of treatment had accounted for another sixty-two thousand. What Ric didn't know was that Genesios therapy could have been started at once and saved him most of his funds, but that the artificial intelligences working for the hospital had tagged him as a suspect character, an alien of no particular standing, with no work history, no policorporate citizenship, and a large amount of cash in his breast pocket. The AIs concluded that Ric was in no position to complain, and they were right.

Computers can't be sued for malpractice. The doctors followed their advice.

All that remained of Ric's money was three thousand SM dollars. Ric could live off of that for a few years, but it wasn't much of a retirement.

The hospital was nice enough to schedule an appointment for him with a career counsellor, who was supposed to find him a job. She worked in the basement of the vast glass hospital building, and her name was Marlene.

4.

Marlene worked behind a desk littered with the artifacts of other people's lives. There were no windows in the office, two ashtrays, both

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full, and on the walls there were travel posters that showed long stretches of emptiness, white beaches, blue ocean, faraway clouds. Nothing alive.

Her green eyes had an opaque quality, as if she was watching a private video screen somewhere in her mind. She wore a lot of silver jewelry on her fingers and wrists and a grey rollneck sweater with cigaret burn marks. Her eyes bore elaborate makeup like the wings of a Red Admiral. Her hair was almost blonde. The only job she could find him was for a legal firm, something called assistant data evaluator.

Before Ric left Marlene's office he asked her to dinner. She turned him down without even changing expression. Ric had the feeling he wasn't quite real to her.

The job of assistant data evaluator consisted of spending the day walking up and down a four-storey spiral staircase in the suite of a law firm, moving files from one office to another. The files were supposedly sensitive and not committed to the firm's computer lest someone attempt to steal them. The salary was insulting. Ric told the law firm that the job was just what he was looking for. They told him to start in two days.

Ric stopped into Marlene's office to tell her he got the job and to ask her to dinner again. She laughed, for what reason he couldn't tell, and said yes.

A slow spring snowfall dropped onto the streets while they ate dinner. With her food Marlene took two red capsules and a yellow pill, grew lively, drank a lot of wine. He walked her home through the snow to her apartment on the seventh floor of an old fourth-rate condeco, a place with water stains on the ceiling and bare bulbs hanging in the halls, the only home she could afford. In the hallway Ric brushed snow from her shoulders and hair and kissed her. He took Marlene to bed and tried to prove to her that he was real.

The next day he checked out of the hospital and moved in.

5.

Ric hadn't bothered to show up on his first day as an assistant data evaluator. Instead he'd spent the day in Marlene's condeco, asking her home comp to search library files and print out everything relating to what the scansheets in their ignorance called "Juvecrime." Before Marlene came home Ric called the most expensive restaurant he could find and told them to deliver a five-course meal to the apartment.

The remains of the meal were stacked in the kitchen. Ric paced back and forth across the small space, his mind humming with the information he'd absorbed. Marlene sat on an adobe-colored couch and watched, a wine glass in one hand and a cigaret in the other, silhouetted by the

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glass self-polarizing wall that showed the bright aluminum-alloy expressway cutting south across melting piles of snow. Plans were vibrating in Ric's mind, nothing firm yet, just neurons stirring on the edge of his awareness, forming fast-mutating combinations. He could feel the tingle, the high, the half-formed ideas as they flicked across neural circuits.

Marlene reached into a dispenser and took out a red pill and a green capsule with orange stripes. Ric looked at her. "How much of that stuff do you take, anyway? Is it medication, or what?"

"I've got anxieties." She put the pills into her mouth, and with a shake of her head dry-swallowed them.

"How big a dose?"

"It's not the dose that matters. It's the proper *combination* of doses. Get it right and the world feels like a lovely warm swimming pool. It's like floating underwater and still being able to breathe. It's wonderful."

"If you say so." He resumed his pacing. Fabric scratched his bare feet. His mind hummed, a blur of ideas that hadn't yet taken shape, flickering, assembling, dissolving without his conscious thought.

"You didn't show up for work," Marlene said. "They gave me a call about that."

"Sorry."

"How are you gonna afford this taste you have for expensive food?" Marlene asked. "Without working, I mean."

"Do something illegal," Ric said. "Most likely."

"That's what I thought." She looked up at him, sideways. "You gonna let me play?"

"If you want."

Marlene swallowed half her wine, looked at the littered apartment, shrugged.

"Only if you really want," Ric said. "It has to be a thing you decide."

"What else have I got to do?" she said.

"I'm going to have to do some research, first," he said. "Spend a few days accessing the library."

Marlene was looking at him again. "Boredom," she said. "In your experience, is that why most people turn to crime?"

"In my experience," he said, "most people turn to crime because of stupidity."

She grinned. "That's cool," she said. "That's sort of what I figured." She lit a cigaret. "You have a plan?"

"Something I can only do once. Then every freak in Western America is going to be looking for me with a machine gun."

Marlene grinned. "Sounds exciting."

He looked at her. "Remember what I said about stupidity."

She laughed. "I've been smart all my life. What's it ever got me?"

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Ric, looking down at her, felt a warning resonate through him, like an unmistakable taste drawn across his tongue. "You've got a lot to lose, Marlene," he said. "A lot more than I do."

"Shit." The cigaret had burned her fingers. She squashed it in the ashtray, too fast, spilling ashes on the couch. Ric watched her for a moment, then went back to his thinking.

People were dying all over California in a war over the neurohormone Genesios Three. There had to be a way to take advantage of it.

6.

"You a cop, buck?"

The style was different here from the people Ric knew in Iberia. In Granada, Ric had worn a gaucho mode straight from Argentina, tight pants with silver dollars sewn down the seams, sashes wound around nipped-in waists, embroidered vests.

He didn't know what was worn by the people who had broken up the Cadillacs. He'd never seen any of them.

Here the new style was something called Urban Surgery. The girl bore the first example Ric had ever seen close up. The henna-red hair was in cornrows, braided with transparent plastic beads that held fast-mutating phosphorescent bacteria that constantly reformed themselves in glowing patterns. The nose had been broadened and flattened to cover most of the cheeks, turning the nostrils into a pair of lateral slits, the base of the nose wider than the mouth. The teeth had been replaced by alloy transplants sharp as razors that clacked together in a precise, unpleasant way when she closed her mouth. The eyebrows were gone altogether and beneath them were dark plastic implants that covered the eye sockets. Ric couldn't tell, and probably wasn't supposed to know, whether there were eyes in there any more, or sophisticated scanners tagged to the optic nerve.

The effect was to flatten the face, turn it into a canvas for the tattoo artist that had covered every inch of exposed flesh. Complex mathematical statements ran over the forehead. Below the black plastic eye implants were urban skyscrapes, silhouettes of buildings providing a false horizon across the flattened nose. The chin appeared to be a circuit diagram.

Ric looked into the dark eye sockets and tried not to flinch. "No," he said. "I'm just passing through."

One of her hands was on the table in front of him. It was tattooed as

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completely as the face and the fingernails had been replaced by alloy razors, covered with transparent plastic safety caps.

"I saw you in here yesterday," she said. "And again today. I was wondering if you want something."

He shrugged. It occurred to him that, repellent as Urban Surgery was, it was fine camouflage. Who was going to be able to tell one of these people from another?

"You're a little old for this place, buck," the girl said. He figured her age as about fourteen. She was small-waisted and had narrow hips and large breasts. Ric did not find her attractive.

This was his second trip to Phoenix. The bar didn't have a name, unless it was simply BAR, that being all that was written on the sign outside. It was below street level, in the storage cellar of an old building. Concrete walls were painted black. Dark plastic tables and chairs had been added, and bare fluorescent tubes decorated the walls. Speaker amps flanked the bar, playing cold electronic music devoid of noticeable rhythm or melody.

He looked at the girl and leaned closer to her. "I need your permission to drink here, or what?" he said.

"No," she said. "Just to deal here."

"I'm not dealing," he said. "I'm just observing the passing urban scene, okay?" He was wearing a lightweight summer jacket of a cream color over a black T-shirt with Cyrillic lettering, black jeans, white sneakers. Nondescript street apparel.

"You got credit?" the girl asked.

"Enough."

"Buy me a drink then?"

He grinned. "I need your permissison to deal, and you don't have any credit? What kind of outlaw are you?"

"A thirsty outlaw."

Ric signaled the bartender. Whatever it was that he brought her looked as if it was made principally out of cherry soda.

"Seriously," she said. "I can pay you back later. Someone I know is supposed to meet me here. He owes me money."

"My name's Marat," said Ric. "With a silent *t*."

"I'm Super Virgin. You from Canada or something? You talk a little funny."

"I'm from Switzerland."

Super Virgin nodded and sipped her drink. Ric glanced around the bar. Most of the patrons wore Urban Surgery or at least made an effort in the direction of its style. Super Virgin frowned at him.

"You're supposed to ask if I'm really cherry," she said. "If you're wondering, the drink should give you a clue."

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"I don't care," Ric said.

She grinned at him with her metal teeth. "You don't wanna ball me?"

Ric watched his dual reflection, in her black eye sockets, slowly shake its head. She laughed. "I like a guy who knows what he likes," she said. "That's the kind we have in Cartoon Messiah. Can I have another drink?"

There was an ecology in kid gangs, Ric knew. They had different reasons for existing and filled different functions. Some wanted turf, some trade, some the chance to prove their ideology. Some moved information, and from Ric's research that seemed to be Cartoon Messiah's function.

But even if Cartoon Messiah were smart, they hadn't been around very long. A perpetual problem with groups of young kids involving themselves in gang activities was that they had very short institutional memories. There were a few things they wouldn't recognize or know to prepare for, not unless they'd been through them at least once. They made up for it by being faster than the opposition, by being more invisible.

Ric was hoping Cartoon Messiah was full of young, fresh minds.

He signaled the bartender again. Super Virgin grinned at him.

"You sure you don't wanna ball me?"

"Positive."

"I'm gonna be cherry till I die. I'm just not interested. None of the guys seem like anybody I'd want to sleep with." Ric didn't say anything. She sipped the last of her drink. "You think I'm repulsive-looking, right?"

"That seems to be your intention."

She laughed. "You're okay, Marat. What's it like in Switzerland?"

"Hot."

"So hot you had to leave, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"You looking for work?"

"Not yet. Just looking around."

She leaned closer to him. "You find out anything interesting while you're looking, and I'll pay you for it. Just leave a message here, at the Bar."

"You deal in information?"

She licked her lips. "That and other things. This Bar, see, it's in a kind of interface. North of here is Lounge Lizard turf, south and east are the Cold Wires, west is the Silicon Romantics. The Romantics are on their way out." She gave a little sneer. "They're brocade commandoes, right? Their turf's being cut up. But here, it's no-gang's-land. Where things get moved from one buyer to another."

"Cartoon Messiah—they got turf?"

She shook her head. "Just places where we can be found. Territory is not what we're after. Two-Fisted Jesus—he's our sort-of chairman—he

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says only stupid people like brocade boys want turf, when the real money's in data."

Ric smiled. "That's smart. Property values are down, anyway."

He could see his reflection in her metal teeth, a pale smear. "You got anything you wanna deal in, I can set it up," she said. "Software? Biologicals? Pharmaceuticals? Wetware?"

"I have nothing. Right now."

She turned to look at a group of people coming in the door. "Cold Wires," she said. "These are the people I'm supposed to meet." She tipped her head back and swallowed the rest of her drink. "They're so goddam bourgeoise," she said. "Look—their surgery's fake, it's just good makeup. And the tattoos—they spray 'em on through a stencil. I hate people who don't have the courage of their convictions, don't you?"

"They can be useful, though." Smiling, thin-lipped.

She grinned at him. "Yeah. They can. Stop by tomorrow and I'll pay you back, okay? See ya." She pushed her chair back, scraping alloy on the concrete floor, a small metal scream.

Ric sipped his drink, watching the room. Letting its rhythm seep through his skin. Things were firming in his mind.

7.

"Hi."

The security guard looked up at him from under the plastic brim of his baseball cap. He frowned. "Hi. You need something? I seen you around before."

"I'm Warren Whitmore," Ric said. "I'm recovering from an accident, going to finish the course of treatment soon. Go out into the real world." Whitmore was one of Ric's former neighbors, a man who'd had his head split in half by a falling beam. He hadn't left any instructions about radical life-preservation measures and the artificial intelligences who ran the hospital were going to keep him alive till they burned up the insurance and then the family's money.

"Yeah?" the guard said. "Congratulations." There was a plastic tape sewed on over the guard's breast pocket that said LYSAGHT.

"The thing is, I don't have a job waiting. Cigar?"

Ric had seen Lysaght smoking big stogies outside the hospital doors. They wouldn't let him light up inside. Ric had bought him the most expensive Havanas available at the hospital gift shop.

Lysaght took the cigar, rolled it between his fingers while he looked left and right down the corridor, trying to decide whether to light it or not. Ric reached for his lighter.

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"I had some military training in my former life," Ric said. "I thought I might look into the idea of getting into the security business, once I get into the world. Could I buy you a drink, maybe, after you get off shift? Talk about what you do."

Lysaght drew on the cigar, still looking left and right, seeing only patients. He was a big fleshy man, about forty, dressed in a black uniform with body armor sewn into pockets on his chest and back. His long dark hair was slicked back behind his ears, falling over his shoulders in greased ringlets. His sideburns came to points. A brushed-alloy gun with a hardwood custom grip and a laser sight hung conspicuously on one hip, next to the gas grenades, next to the plastic handwrap restraints, next to the combat staff, next to the portable gas mask.

"Sure," Lysaght said. "Why not?" He blew smoke in the general direction of an elderly female patient walking purposefully down the corridor in flowery pajamas. The patient blinked but kept walking.

"Hey, Mrs. Calderone, how you doin'?" Lysaght said. Mrs. Calderone ignored him. "Head case," said Lysaght.

"I want to work for a sharp outfit though," Ric said. He looked at Lysaght's belt. "With good equipment and stuff, you know?"

"That's Folger Security," Lysaght said. "If we weren't good, we wouldn't be working for a hospital this size."

During his time in the Cadillacs and elsewhere, Ric had been continually surprised by how little it actually took to bribe someone. A few drinks, a few cigars, and Lysaght was working for him. And Lysaght didn't even know it yet. Or, with luck, ever.

"Listen," Lysaght was saying. "I gotta go smoke this in the toilet. But I'll see you at the guard station around five, okay?"

"Sounds good."

8.

That night, his temples throbbing with pain, Ric entered Marlene's condeco and walked straight to the kitchen for something to ease the long raw ache that seemed to coat the insides of his throat. He could hear the sounds of *Alien Inquisitor* on the vid. He was carrying a two-liter plastic bottle of industrial-strength soap he'd just stolen from the custodian's store room here in Marlene's condeco. He put down the bottle of soap, rubbed his sore shoulder muscle, took some whiskey from the shelf, and poured it into a tall glass. He took a slow, deliberate drink and winced as he felt the fire in his throat. He added water to the glass. *Alien Inquisitor* diminished in volume, then he heard the sound of Marlene's flipflops slapping against her heels.

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Her eyes bore the heavy makeup she wore to work. "Jesus," Marlene said. She screwed up her face. "You smell like someone's been putting out cigarets in your pockets. Where the hell have you been?"

"Smoking cigars with a rentacop. He wears so much equipment and armor he has to wear a truss, you know that? He got drunk and told me."

"Which rentacop?"

"One who works for the hospital."

"The hospital? We're going to take off the hospital?" Marlene shook her head. "That's pretty serious, Ric."

Ric was wondering if she'd heard *take off* used that way on the vid. "Yes." He eased the whiskey down his throat again. Better.

"Isn't that dangerous? Taking off the same hospital where you were a patient?"

"We're not going to be doing it in person. We're going to have someone else do the work."

"Who?"

"Cartoon Messiah, I think. They're young and promising."

"What's the stuff in the plastic bottle for?"

He looked at her, swirling the whiskey absently in the glass. "The stuff's mostly potassium hydroxide," he said. "That's wood lye. You can use it to make plastic explosive."

Marlene shrugged, then reached in her pocket for a cigaret. Ric frowned.

"You seem not to be reacting to that, Marlene," he said. "Robbing a hospital is serious, plastic explosive isn't?"

She blew smoke at him. "Let me show you something." She went back into the living room and then returned with her pouch belt. She fished in it for a second, then threw him a small aerosol bottle.

Ric caught it and looked at the label. "Christ," he said. He blinked and looked at the bottle again. "Jesus Christ."

"Ten-ounce aerosol bottle of mustard gas," Marlene said. "Sixteen dollars in Starbright scrip at your local boutique. For personal protection, you know? The platinum designer bottle costs more."

Ric was blinking furiously. "Christ," he said.

"Some sixteen-year-old asshole tried to rape me once," Marlene said. "I hit him with the gas and now he's reading braille. You know?"

Ric took another sip of the whiskey and then wordlessly placed the mustard gas in Marlene's waiting palm. "You're in America now, Ric," Marlene said. "You keep forgetting that, singing your old Spanish marching songs."

He rubbed his chin. "Right," he said. "I've got to make adjustments."

"Better do it soon," Marlene said, "if you're going to start busting into hospitals."

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9.

The next day Ric went to the drugstore, where he purchased a large amount of petroleum jelly, some nasal mist that came in squeeze bottles, liquid bleach, a bottle of toilet cleaner, a small amount of alcohol-based lamp fuel, and a bottle of glycerin. Then he drove to a chemical supply store, where he bought some distilling equipment and some litmus paper.

On his way back he stopped by an expensive liquor store and bought some champagne. He didn't want the plastic bottles the domestic stuff came in; instead he bought the champagne imported from France, in glass bottles with the little hollow cone in the bottom. It was the biggest expense of the day.

10.

Ric was distilling acrolein out of toilet bowl cleaner and glycerine when Marlene came home from work, cursing at her boss from the moment she entered the apartment. She watched as Ric put the acrolein into the nasal mist squeeze bottles, which he'd emptied and washed earlier.

What's that, Ricardo?" she asked. He gave her a bottle.

"Use it instead of the mustard gas," he said. "It isn't quite so . . . devastating."

"I *like* being devastating," Marlene said. She put the squeeze bottle back on the table and poured a glass of champagne.

I made plastic explosives today," Ric said. "They're in the icebox."

"Great." She put some pills in her mouth and swallowed them down with champagne.

"I'll show you a trick," Ric said. He got some twine from the cupboard, cut it into strips, and soaked it in the lamp fuel. While it was soaking he got a large mixing bowl and filled it with water and ice. Then he tied the string around the empty champagne bottles, about three inches above the topmost point of the little hollow cone on the bottom. He got his lighter and set fire to the thread. It burned slowly, with a cool blue flame, for a couple minutes. Then he took the bottle and plunged it into the ice water. It split neatly in half with a crystalline snapping sound.

Ric took some of the plastic explosive and packed it into the bottom of the champagne bottle. He pushed a pencil into the middle of it, making a narrow hole for the detonator.

"There," he said. "That's a shaped charge. I'll make the detonators tomorrow, out of peroxide, acetone, and sulphuric acid. It's easy."

"What's a shaped charge, Ricardo?"

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"It's used for blowing a hole through armor. Steel doors, cars. Tanks. Things like that."

Marlene looked at him appraisingly. "You're adjusting yourself to America, all right," she said.

11.

Ric took a bus to Phoenix and rented a motel room with a kitchenette, paying five days in advance and using a false name. In the motel he changed clothes and took a cab to the Bar. Super Virgin waved as he came in. She was with her friend, Captain Islam. He was a long, gawky boy, about sixteen, with his head shaved and covered with the tattoos of Urban Surgery. He hadn't had any alterations yet, or the eye implants this group favored. Instead he wore complicated mirrorshades with twin minicameras, registering radiation in UV and infrared as well as the normal spectrum, mounted above the bridge of the nose and liquid-crystal video displays on the backs of the eyepieces that received input from the minicameras or from any vid program he felt like seeing. Ric wondered if things weren't real to him, not unless he saw them on the vid. He didn't talk much, just sat quietly behind his drink and his shades and watched whatever it was that he watched. The effect was unsettling and was probably meant to be. Ric could be talking to him and would never know whether the man was looking at him or at *Video Vixens*. Ric had first pegged him for a user, but Super Virgin said not.

Ric got a whiskey at the bar and joined the two at their table. "Slow night?" he asked.

"We're waiting for the jai alai to come on," Super Virgin said. "Live from Bilbao. We've got some money down."

"Sounds slow to me."

She gave a brittle laugh. "Guess so, Marat. You got any ideas for accelerating our motion?"

Ric frowned. "I have something to sell. Some information. But I don't know if it's something you'd really want to deal with."

"Too hot?" The words were Captain Islam's. Ric looked at his own distorted face in the Captain's spectacles.

"Depends on your concept of *hot*. The adjective I had in mind was *big*."

"Big." The word came with a pause before and after, as if Captain Islam had never heard the word before and was wondering what it meant.

Ric took a bottle of nasal mist out of his pocket and squeezed it once up each nostril.

"Got a virus?" Virgin asked.

"I'm allergic to Arizona."

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Captain Islam was frowning. "So what's this action of yours, buck?" he asked.

"Several kilos of Thunder."

Captain Islam continued to stare into the interior of his mirrors. Super Virgin burst into laughter.

"I knew you weren't here as a tourist, Marat!" she cackled. " 'Several kilos!' *One* kilo is weight! What the hell is 'several'?"

"I don't know if you people can move that much," Ric said. "Also, I'd like an agreement. I want twenty percent of the take, and I want you to move my twenty percent for me, free of charge. If you think you can move that kind of weight at all, that is." He sipped his whiskey. "Maybe I should talk to some people in California."

"You talk to them, you end up dead," Virgin said. "They're not friendly to anyone these days, not when Thunder's involved."

Ric smiled. "Maybe you're right."

"Where is it? Who do we have to steal it from?"

"Another thing," Ric said. "I want certain agreements. I don't want any excessive force used, here. Nobody shot."

"Sometimes things happen," Captain Islam said. Ric had the feeling that the Captain was definitely looking at him this time. "Sometimes things can't be avoided."

"This stuff is guarded by an organization who won't forget it if any of their people get hurt," Ric explained. "If you try to move this kind of weight, word's going to get out that it's you that has the Thunder, and that means these characters are going to find out sooner or later. You might be tempted to give me to them as a way of getting the heat off you. Which would be a mistake, because I intend on establishing an alibi. That would mean that they're going to be extremely upset with you misleading them." Ric sipped his whiskey and smiled. "I'm just looking out for all our interests."

"A hospital," Captain Islam said. He shook his head. "You want us to take off a hospital. The one up in Flag, right? You stupid shit."

"I have a plan," Ric said. "I know their defenses, to a certain point. I know how they're organized. I know how they *think*."

"That's Folger Security, for chrissake," Captain Islam said. "They're tough. They don't forget when someone makes idiots out of them."

"That's why it's got to be my rules," Ric said. "But I should probably mention something here." He grinned, seeing the smile reflected in the Captain's quicksilver eyes. "It's an inside job," Ric said. "I'm friends with someone on their force."

Virgin whooped and banged him on the shoulder with her left hand, the one with the sheathed claws."Why didn't you say so?" she said.

"You people," Ric said. "You've got to learn to be patient."

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12.

Treble whimpered against a throbbing bass line. Shafts of red sunset sliced into the violet depth of the Grand Canyon.

Marlene backed, spun, turned back to Ric, touched palms. She was wearing Indian war paint. Colors zigzagged across her face. Her eyes and smile were bright.

The band was dressed like hussars, lights glittering off brocade, the lead singer sweating under her dolman, threatening to split her tight breeches with each of her leaps. Her eye makeup dazzled like butterfly wings. Her lyrics were all heroism, thunder, revolution. The romantic wave against which Cartoon Messiah and Urban Surgery were a cool reaction.

Marlene stepped forward, pressing herself against him. He circled her with his arms, felt her sacral dimples as they leaned back and spun against each other. At the end of the five-bar chorus she gave a grind of her hips against him, then winked.

He laughed. Here he was, establishing his alibi in grand style, while, back in Flagstaff, Cartoon Messiah were working for him. And they didn't even know it.

13.

Readiness crackled from Ric's nerves as he approached the hotel door. They could try to kill him, he knew. Now would be the best time. Black Thunder tended to generate that kind of behavior. He'd been telling them he had ideas for other jobs, that he'd be valuable to them alive, but he couldn't be sure if they believed him.

The door opened and Super Virgin grinned at him with her metal teeth. "Piece of cake, Marat," she said. "Your cut's on the table."

The hotel room was dark, the walls draped in blueblack plastic. More plastic sheets covered the floors, the ceiling, some of the furniture. Coldness touched Ric's spine. There could be a lot of blood spilled in here, and the plastic would keep it from getting on anything. Computer consoles and vid sets gave off quiet hums. Cables snaked over the floor, held down with duct tape. On the table was a half-kilo white paper packet. Captain Islam and Two-Fisted Jesus sat beside it, tapping into a console. Jesus looked up.

"Just in time," he said, "for the movies."

He was a skinny boy, about eighteen, his identity obscured by the obsessive mutilations of Urban Surgery. He wore a T-shirt featuring a

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picture of a muscular, bearded man in tights, with cape and halo. Here in this place, the hotel room he had hung with plastic and filled with electronics, he moved and spoke with an assurance the others hadn't absorbed, the kind of malevolent grace displayed by those who gave law and style to others, unfettered by conscience. Ric could appreciate Jesus's moves. He'd had them once himself.

Ric walked to the paper packet and hefted it. He tore open a corner, saw a row of little white envelopes, each labeled Genesios Three with the pharmaceutical company sigil in the corner. He didn't know a test for B-44 so he just stuffed the envelope in his pocket.

"This is gonna be great," Super Virgin said. She came up behind him and handed him a highball glass half-filled with whiskey. "You got time to watch a flick? We went in packing cameras. We're gonna cut a documentary of the whole thing and sell it to a station in Nogales. They'll write some scenes around it and use it on an episode of *VidWar.*" She giggled. "The Mexicans don't care how many gringo hospitals get taken off. They'll put some kind of plot around it. A dumb love story or something. But it's the highest-rated program, 'cause people know it's real. Except for *Australian Rules Firefight Football,* and that's real, too."

Ric looked around and found a chair. It seemed as if these people planned to let him live. He reached into his pocket and fired a round of nasal mist up each nostril. "Sure. I'll watch," he sniffed. "I got time."

"This is a rough cut only, okay?" Captain Islam's voice. "So bear with us."

There was a giant-sized liquid-crystal vid display set up on the black plastic on the wall. A picture sizzled into existence. The hospital, a vast concrete fortress set in an aureole of halogen light. Ric felt his tongue go dry. He swallowed with difficulty.

The image moved, jolting. Whoever was carrying the camera was walking, fast, across the parking lot. Two-Fisted Jesus tapped the keys of his computer. The image grew smooth. "We're using a lot of computer enhancement on the vid, see?" Super Virgin said. "We can smooth out the jitters from the moving camera. Except for select bits to enhance the ver—the versi—"

"Verisimilitude," said Captain Islam.

"Right. Just to let everyone know this is the real thing. And we're gonna change everyone's appearance electronically, so no one can recognize us."

Cut to someone moving into the hospital's front door, moving right past the metal detectors. Ric saw a tall girl, blonde, dressed in pink shorts and a tube top. White sandal straps coiled about her ankles.

"A mercenary," Virgin said. "We hired her for this. The slut."

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Captain Islam laughed. "She's an actress," he explained. "Trying for a career south of the border. Wants the publicity."

The girl stepped up to a guard. Ric recognized Lysaght. She was asking directions, pointing. Lysaght was gazing at her breasts as he replied. She smiled and nodded and walked past. He looked after her, chewing his cigar, hiking up his gunbelt. Ric grinned. As long as guards like Lysaght were around, nothing was safe.

The point of view changed abruptly, a subjective shot, someone moving down a hospital corridor. Patients in ordinary clothes moving past, smiling.

"We had a camera in this necklace she was wearing. A gold owl, about an inch long, with 3D vidcams behind the eyes. Antenna in the chain, receiver in her bag. We pasted it to her chest so it would always be looking straight forward and wouldn't get turned around or anything. Easy stuff."

"We gotta do some pickups, here," Jesus said. "Get a picture of the girl moving down the corridor. Then we tell the computer to put all the stripes on the walls. It'll be worth more when we sell it."

Subjective shot of someone moving into a woman's toilet, stepping into a stall, reaching into a handbag for a pair of coveralls.

"Another pickup shot," Jesus muttered. "Gotta get her putting on her coveralls." He made a note on a pad.

The point of view lurched upward, around, out of the stall. Centered on a small ventilator intake high on a wall. Hands came into the picture, holding a screwdriver.

"Methanethiol," Super Virgin said. "That stuff's gonna be real useful from now on. How'd you know how to make it?"

"Elementary chemistry," Ric said. He'd used it to clear out political meetings of which the Cadillacs didn't approve.

The screen was off the ventilator. Hands were reaching into the bag, taking out a small glass bottle. Carefully loosening the screw top, the hands placed the bottle upright in the ventilator. Then the point of view dipped, a hand reached down to pick up the ventilator screen. Then the ventilator screen was shoved violently into the hole, knocking the bottle over.

Airborne methanethiol gave off a horrible, nauseating smell at one-fiftieth of a part per billion. The psychology wing of the hospital was going to get a dose considerably in excess of that.

The subjective camera was moving with great rapidity down hospital corridors. To a stairwell, then down.

Cut to Super Virgin in a phone booth. She had a small voice recorder in her hand, and was punching buttons.

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"Freeze that," said Two-Fisted Jesus. Virgin's image turned to ice. Jesus began tapping keys.

The tattooing shifted, dissolved to a different pattern. Super Virgin laughed. Her hair shortened, turned darker. The black insets over her eyes vanished. Brown eyes appeared, then they turned a startling pale blue.

"Leave the teeth," she said.

"Nah. I have an idea." Two-Fisted Jesus sat tapping keys for about thirty seconds. He pressed the enter button and the metal teeth disappeared completely. He moved the picture forward a second, then back. Virgin's tongue moved redly behind her tattooed lips. The interior of the mouth was pink, a lot of gum, no teeth at all. She clapped her hands.

"The Mexicans will probably replace her image with some vidstar, anyway," Captain Islam said. "Urban Surgery is too much for them, right now."

"Okay. I want to see this in three dimensions," Jesus said. Super Virgin's image detached itself from the background and began rotating. He stopped it every so often and made small adjustments.

"Make me taller," Super Virgin said. "And skinnier. And give me smaller tits. I hate my tits."

"We do that every time," Jesus said. "People are gonna start to twig."

"Chrome tits. Leather tits. Anything."

Captain Islam laughed. Two-Fisted Jesus made minor adjustments and ignored Super Virgin's complaint.

"Here we go. Say your line."

The image began moving. Virgin's new green eyes sparkled as she held the recorder up to the mouthpiece of the telephone.

"This is Royal Flag." It was the name of one of Arizona's more ideological kid gangs. The voice had been electronically altered and sounded flat. "We've just planted a poison gas bomb in your psychology wing. All the head cases are gonna see Jesus. The world's gene pool will be so much healthier from now on. Have yourself a pleasant day."

Super Virgin was laughing. "Wait'll you see the crowd scenes. Stellar stuff, believe me."

"I believe," said Ric.

14.

The video was full of drifting smoke. Vague figures moved through it. Jesus froze the picture and tried to enhance the images, without any success. "Damn," he said. "More pickups."

Ric had watched the action as members of Cartoon Messiah in Folger

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Security uniforms had hammered their way into a hospital back door. They had moved faultlessly through the corridors to the vault and blasted their way in with champagne-bottle shaped charges. The blasts had set off tremblor alarms in the vault and the Folger people realized they were being hit. Now the raiders were in the corridor before the vault, retracing their steps at a run.

"Okay," Super Virgin said. "The moment of truth, coming up."

The corridor was full of billowing tear gas. Crouched figures moved through it. Commands were coming down on the monitored Folger channels. Then, coming through the smoke, another figure. A tall woman in a helmet, her hand pressed to her ear, trying to hear the radio. There was a gun in her hand. She raised the gun.

Thuds on the soundtrack. Tear-gas canisters, fired at short range. One of them struck the woman in her armored chest and bounced off. It hadn't flown far enough to arm itself and it just rolled down the corridor. The woman fell flat.

"Just knocked the wind out of her." Captain Islam was grinning. "How about that for keeping our deal, huh?" Somebody ran forward and kicked the gun out of her hand. The camera caught a glimpse of her lying on the floor, her mouth open, trying to breathe. There were dots of sweat on her nose. Her eye makeup looked like butterfly wings.

"Now that's what I call poignant," Jesus said. "Human interest stuff. You know?"

The kids ran away across the parking lot, onto their fuel-cell tricycles, and away, bouncing across the parking lot and the railroad tracks beyond.

"We're gonna spice this up a bit," Jesus said. "Cut in some shots of guards shooting at us, that kind of thing. Steal some suspenseful music. Make the whole thing more exciting. What do you think?"

"I like it," said Ric. He put down his untasted whiskey. Jacob and his neurotoxin had made him cautious. "Do I get any royalties? Being scriptwriter and all?"

"The next deal you set up for us. Maybe."

Ric shrugged. "How are you gonna move the Thunder?"

"Small pieces, probably."

"Let me give you some advice," Ric said. "The longer you hang onto it, the bigger the chance Folger will find out you have it and start cramping your action. I have an idea. Can you handle a large increase of capital?"

15.

"Is this the stuff? Great." Marlene swept in the motel room door, grin-

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ning, with her overnight bag. She gave Ric a brief hug, then went to the table of the kitchenette. She picked up the white packet, hefted it in her hand.

"Light," she said.

"Yeah."

"I can't believe people kill each other over this."

"They could kill *us*," Ric said. "Don't forget that."

Marlene licked her lips and peeled the packet. She took one of the small white envelopes and tore it open, spilling dark powder into her cupped palm. She cocked her head.

"Doesn't look like much. How do you take it?"

Ric remembered the flood of well-being in his body, the way the world had suddenly tasted better. No, he thought. He wasn't going to get hung up on Thunder. "Intraveneous, mostly," he said. "Or they could put it in capsules."

Marlene sniffed at it. "Doesn't smell like anything. What's the dose?"

"I don't know. I wasn't planning on taking any."

She began licking the stuff on her palm. Ric watched the little pink tongue lapping at the powder. He turned his eyes away.

"Take it easy," he said.

"Tastes funny. Kind of like green pepper sauce, with a touch of kerosene."

"A touch of stupidity," he said. "A touch of . . ." He moved around the room, hands in his pockets. "A touch of craziness. People who are around Black Thunder get crazy."

Marlene finished licking her palm and kicked off her shoes. "Craziness sounds good," she said. She stepped up behind him and put her arms around him. "How crazy do you think we can get tonight?"

"I don't know." He thought for a minute. "Maybe I could show you our movie."

16.

Ric faced the window in the motel room, watching, his mind humming. The window had been dialed to polarize completely and he could see himself, Marlene behind him on the untidy bed, the plundered packet of Thunder on the table. It had been eight days since the hospital had been robbed. Marlene had taken the bus to Phoenix every evening.

"You should try some of our product," Marlene said. "The stuff's just . . . when I use it, I can feel my mind just start to click. Move faster, smoother. Thoughts come out of nowhere."

"Right," Ric said. "Nowhere."

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Ric saw Marlene's reflection look up at his own dark plateglass ghost. "Do I detect sarcasm, here?"

"No. Preoccupation, that's all."

"Half the stuff's mine, right? I can eat it, burn it, drop it out the window. Drop it on your head, if I want to. Right?"

"That is correct," said Ric.

"Things are getting dull," Marlene said. "You're spending your evenings off drinking with Captain Islam and Super Virgin and Krishna Commando . . . I get to stay here and watch the vid."

"Those people I'm drinking with," Ric said. "There's a good chance they could die because of what we're going to do. They're our victims. Would you like to have a few drinks with them? A few smokes?" He turned from the window and looked at her. "Knowing they may die because of you?"

Marlene frowned up at him. "Are you scared of them?" she asked. "Is that why you're talking like this?"

Ric gave a short laugh. Marlene ran her fingers through her almost-blonde hair. Ric watched her in the mirror.

"You don't have to involve yourself in this part, Marlene," Ric said. "I can do it by myself, I think."

She was looking at the darkened vid screen. Her eyes were bright. A smile tugged at her lips.

"I'm ready," she said. "Let's do it."

"I've got to get some things ready first."

"Hurry up. I don't want to waste this feeling I've got."

Ric closed his eyes. He didn't want to see his reflection any more. "What feeling is that?" he asked.

"The feeling that my time is coming. To try something new."

"Yeah," Ric said. His eyes were still closed. "That's what I thought."

17

Ric, wearing leather gardeners' gloves, smoothed the earth over the explosive device, wrapped in plastic, he had just buried under a pyracantha bush planted next to a vacation cabin. Drizzle rattled off his collar. His knees were growing wet. He took the aerial for the radio detonator and pulled it carefully along one of the stems of the bush.

Marlene stood next to him in red plastic boots. She was standing guard, snuffling in the cold. Ric could hear the sound of her lips as she chewed gum.

White shafts of light tracked over their heads, filtered by juniper scrub that stood between the cabins and the expressway heading north out of

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Flagstaff. Ric froze. His form, caught among pyracantha barbs, cast a stark moving shadow on the peeling white wall.

"Flashlight," he said, when the car had passed. Moving between the light and any onlookers, Marlene flicked it on. Ric carefully smoothed the soil, spread old leaves. He thought the thorns on the pyracantha would keep most people away, but he didn't want disturbed soil attracting anyone.

Rain danced down in the yellow light. "Thanks," he said. Marlene popped a bubble. Ric stood up, brushing muck from his knees. There were more bundles to bury, and it was going to be a long, wet night.

18.

"They're going to take you off if they can," Ric said. "They're from California and they know this is a one-shot deal, so they don't care if they offend you or leave you dead. But they think it's going to happen in Phoenix, see." Ric, Super Virgin, and Two-Fisted Jesus stood in front of the juniper by the alloy road, looking down at the cluster of cabins. "They may have hired people from the Cold Wires or whoever, so that they can have people who know the terrain. So the idea is, we move the meet up to the last minute. Up here, north of Flag."

"We don't know the terrain, either," Jesus said. He looked uncomfortable here, his face a monochrome blotch in the unaccustomed sun.

Ric took a bottle of nasal mist from his pocket and squeezed it once up each nostril. He sniffed. "You can learn it between now and then. Rent all the cabins, put soldiers in the nearest ones. Lay in your commo gear." Ric pointed up at the ridge above where they stood. "Put some people with long guns up there, some IR goggles and scopes. Anyone comes in, you'll know about it."

"I don't know, Marat. I like Phoenix. I know the way that city thinks." Jesus shook his head. "Tourist cabins."

"They're better than hotel rooms. Tourist cabins have back doors."

"Hey." Super Virgin was grinning, metal teeth winking in the sun as she tugged on Jesus' sleeve. "Expand your horizons. This is the *great outdoors.*"

Jesus shook his head. "I'll think about it."

19.

Marlene was wearing war paint and dancing in the middle of her

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condeco living room. The furniture was pushed back to the walls, the music was loud enough to rattle the crystal on the kitchen shelves.

"You've got to decide, Marlene," Ric said. He was sitting behind the pushed-back table, and the paper packets of Thunder were laid out in front of him. "How much of this do you want to sell?"

"I'll decide later."

"Now. Now, Marlene."

"Maybe I'll keep it all."

Ric looked at her. She shook sweat out of her eyes and laughed.

"Just a joke, Ric."

He said nothing.

"It's just happiness," she said, dancing. "Happiness in paper envelopes. Better than money. You ought to use some. It'll make you less tense." Sweat was streaking her war paint. "What'll you use the money for, anyway? Move to Zanzibar and buy yourself a safe condeco and a bunch of safe investments? Sounds boring to me, Ric. Why'n't you use it to create some excitement?"

He could not, Ric thought, afford much in the way of regret. But still a sadness came over him, drifting through his body on slow opiate time. Another few days, he thought, and he wouldn't have to use people any more. Which was good, because he was losing his taste for it.

20.

A kid from California was told to wait by a certain public phone at a certain time, with his bank and without his friends. The phone call told him to go to another phone booth and be there within a certain allotted time. He complained, but the phone hung up in mid-syllable.

At the second phone he was told to take the keys taped to the bottom of the shelf in the phone booth, go to such-and-such a car in the parking lot, and drive to Flagstaff to another public phone. His complaints were cut short by the slamming receiver. Once in Flagstaff, he was given another set of directions. By now he had learned not to complain.

If there were still people with him they were very good, because they hadn't been seen at any of the turns of his course.

He was working for Ric, even though he didn't know it.

21.

Marlene was practicing readiness. New patterns were constantly flick-

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ering through her mind and she loved watching her head doing its tricks.

She was wearing her war paint as she sat up on a tall ridge behind the cabins, her form encased in a plastic envelope that dispersed her body heat in patterns unrecognizable to infra-red scanners. She had a radio and a powerful antenna, and she was humming "Greensleeves" to herself as she looked down at the cabins through long binoculars wrapped in a scansheet paper tube to keep the sun from winking on the lenses. Marlene also had headphones on and a parabolic mic pointed down at the cabins, so that she could hear anything going on. Right now all she could hear was the wind.

She could see the cabins perfectly, as well as the two riflemen on the ridge across the road. She was far away from anything likely to happen, but if things went well she wouldn't be needed for anything but pushing buttons on cue anyway.

"Greensleeves" hummed on and on. Marlene was having a good time. Working for Ric.

22.

Two-Fisted Jesus had turned the cabin into another plastic-hung cavern, lit by pale holograms and cool video monitors, filled with the hum of machinery and the brightness of liquid crystal. Right in the middle was a round coffee table full of crisp paper envelopes.

Ric had been allowed entry because he was one of the principals in the transaction. He'd undergone scanning as he entered, both for weapons and for electronics. Nothing had been found. His Thunder, and about half of Marlene's, was sitting on the table.

Only two people were in the room besides Ric. Super Virgin had the safety caps off her claws and was carrying an automatic with laser sights in a belt holster.

Ric considered the sights a pure affectation in a room this small. Jesus had a sawed-off twin-barrel shotgun sitting in his lap. The pistol grip might break his wrist but the spread would cover most of the room, and Ric wondered if Jesus had considered how much electronics he'd lose if he ever used it.

23.

Where three lightposts had been marked with fluorescent tape, the kid from California pulled off on the verge of the alloy road that wound ahead to leap over the Grand Canyon into Utah. Captain Islam pulled

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up behind him with two soldiers, and they scanned the kid right there, stripped him of a pistol and a homing sensor, and put him in the back of their own car.

"You're beginning to piss me off," the kid said.

"Just do what we tell you," Captain Islam said, pulling away, "and you'll be king of Los Angeles."

24.

Ric's hands were trembling so hard he had to press them hard against the arms of his chair in order to keep it from showing. He could feel sweat oozing from his armpits. He really wasn't good at this kind of thing.

The kid from California was pushed in the door by Captain Islam, who stepped out and closed the door behind him. The kid was black and had clear plastic eye implants, with the electronics gleaming inside the transparent eyeball. He had patterned scarring instead of the tattoos, and was about sixteen. He wore a silver jacket, carried a duffel to put the Thunder in, and seemed annoyed.

"Once you step inside," Jesus said, "you have five minutes to complete our transaction. Go ahead and test any of the packets at random."

"Yeah," the kid said. "I'll do that." He crouched by the table, pulled vials from his pockets, and made a series of tests while Jesus counted off at fifteen-second intervals. He managed to do four tests in three minutes, then stood up. Ric could see he was salivating for the stuff.

"It's good," he said.

"Let's see your key." The kid took a credit spike from his pocket and handed it to Jesus, who put it in the computer in front of him. Jesus transferred two hundred fifteen thousand in Starbright policorporate scrip from the spike to his own spike that was jacked into slot two.

"Take your stuff," Jesus said, settling back in his seat. "Captain Islam will take you back to your car. Nice doing business."

The kid gave a sniff, took his spike back, and began to stuff white packets into his duffel. He left the cabin without saying a word. Adrenaline was wailing along Ric's nerves. He stood and took his own spike from his left-hand jacket pocket. His right went to the squeeze bottle of nasal mist in his right. Stray novae were exploding at the peripherals of his vision.

"Look at this, Virgin," Ric said. "Look at all the money sitting in this machine." He laughed. Laughter wasn't hard, but stopping the laughter was.

"Twenty percent is yours, Marat," Jesus said. "Give me your spike."

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As Super Virgin stepped up to look at the monitor, Ric brought the squeeze bottle out of his pocket and fired acrolein into her face. His spin toward Jesus was so fast that Virgin's scream had barely begun before he fired another burst of the chemical at Jesus, slamming one hand down on the shotgun to keep him from bringing it up. He'd planned on just holding it there till the boy's grip loosened, but nerves took over and he wrenched it effortlessly from Jesus' hands and barely stopped himself from smashing Jesus in the head with it.

Virgin was on her hands and knees, mucous hanging from her nose and lips. She was trying to draw the pistol. Ric kicked it away. It fell on muffled plastic.

Ric turned and pulled the spikes from the machine. Jesus had fallen out of his chair, was clawing at his face. "Dead man," Jesus said, gasping the words.

"Don't threaten me, asshole," Ric said. "It could have been mustard gas."

And then Marlene, on the ridge far above, watched the sweep hand touch five minutes, thirty seconds, and she pressed her radio button. All the buried charges went off, blasting bits of the other cabins into the sky and doubtless convincing the soldiers in the other buildings that they were under fire by rocket or mortar, that the kid from California had brought an army with him. Simultaneous with the explosive, other buried packages began to gush concealing white smoke into the air. The wind was strong but there was a lot of smoke.

Ric opened the back door and took off, the shotgun hanging in his hand. Random fire burst out but none of it came near. The smoke provided cover from both optical scanners and infra-red, and it concealed him all the way across the yard behind the cabin and down into the arroyo behind it. Sixty yards down the arroyo was a culvert that ran under the expressway. Ric dashed through it, wetting himself to the knees in cold spring snowmelt.

He was now on the other side of the expressway. He didn't think anyone would be looking for him here. He threw the shotgun away and kept running. There was a cross-country motorbike waiting a little farther up the stream.

25.

"There," Ric said, pressing the return button. "Half of it's yours."

Marlene was still wearing her war paint. She sipped cognac from a crystal glass and took her spike out of the computer. She laughed. "A

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hundred K of Starbright," she said, "and paper packets of happiness. What else do I need?"

"A fast armored car, maybe," Ric said. He pocketed his spike. "I'm taking off," he said. He turned to her. "There's room on the bike for two."

"To where?" She was looking at him sidelong.

"To Mexico, for starters," he said. A lie. Ric planned on heading northeast and losing himself for a while in Navajoland.

"To some safe little country. A safe little apartment."

"That's the idea."

Marlene took a hefty swig of cognac. "Not me," she said. "I'm planning on staying in this life."

Ric felt a coldness brush his spine. He reached out to take her hand. "Marlene," he said carefully. "You've got to leave this town. Now."

She pulled her hand away. "Not a chance, Ricardo. I plan on telling my boss just what I think of him. Tomorrow morning. I can't wait."

There was a pain in Ric's throat. "Okay," he said. He stood up. "See you in Mexico, maybe." He began to move for the door. Marlene put her arms around him from behind. Her chin dug into his collarbone.

"Stick around," she said. "For the party."

He shook his head, uncoiled her arms, slid out of them.

"You treat me like I don't know what I'm doing," Marlene said.

He turned and looked at her. Bright eyes looked at him from a mask of bright paint. "You don't," he said.

"I've got lots of ideas. You showed me how to put things together."

"Now I'm showing you how to run and save your life."

"Hah. I'm not going to run. I'm going to stroll out with a briefcase full of happiness and a hundred K in my pocket."

He looked at her and felt a pressure hard in his chest. He knew that none of this was real to her, that he'd never been able to penetrate that strange screen in her mind that stood between Marlene and the rest of the world. Ric had never pierced it, but soon the world would. He felt a coldness filling him, a coldness that had nothing to do with sorrow.

It was hard not to run when he turned and left the apartment.

His breathing came more freely with each step he took.

26

When Ric came off the Navajo Reservation he saw scansheet headlines about how the California gang wars had spilled over into Phoenix, how there were dead people turning up in alleys, others were missing, a club had been bombed. All those people working for him, covering his retreat.

In New Zealand he bought into a condecology in Christchurch, a big

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place with armored shutters and armored guards, a first-rate new artificial intelligence to handle investments, and a mostly-foreign clientele who profited by the fact that a list of the condeco's inhabitants was never made public . . . this was before he found out that he could buy private property here, a big house on the South Island with a view of his own personal glacier, without a chance of anybody's war accidentally rolling over him.

It was an interesting feeling, sitting alone in his own house, knowing there wasn't anyone within five thousand miles who wanted to kill him.

Ric made friends. He played the market and the horses. And he learned to ski.

At a ski party in late September, held in the house of one of his friends, he drifted from room to room amid a murmur of conversation punctuated with brittle laughter. He had his arm around someone named Reiko, the sheltered daughter of a policorporate bigwig. The girl, nineteen and a student, had long black hair that fell like a tsunami down her shoulders, and was fascinated with his talk of life in the real world. He walked into a back room that was bright with the white glare of video, wondering if the jai alai scores had been posted yet, and he stared into his own face as screams rose around him and his nerves turned to hot magnesium flares.

"Ugh. Mexican scum show," said Reiko, and then she saw the actor's face and her eyes widened.

Ric felt his knees trembling and he sank into an armchair in the back of the room. Ice tittered in his drink. The man on the vid was flaying alive a woman who hung by her wrists from a beam. Blood ran down his forearms. The camera cut quickly to his tiger's eyes, his thin smile. Ric's eyes. Ric's smile.

"My god," said Reiko. "It's really you, isn't it?"

"No," Ric said. Shaking his head.

"I can't believe they let this stuff even on private stations," someone said from the hallway. Screams rose from the vid. Ric's mind was flailing in the dark.

"I can't watch this," Reiko said, and rushed away. Ric didn't see her go. Burning sweat was running down the back of his neck.

The victim's screams rose. Blood traced artful patterns down her body. The camera cut to her face.

Marlene's face.

Nausea swept Ric and he doubled in his chair. He remembered Two-Fisted Jesus and his talent for creating video images, altering faces, voices, action. They'd found Marlene, as Ric had thought they would, and her voice and body were memorized by Jesus' computers. Maybe the torture was even real.

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"It's got to be him," someone in the room said. "It's even his voice. His accent."

"He never did say," said another voice, "what he used to do for a living."

Frozen in his chair, Ric watched the show to the end. There was more torture, more bodies. The video-Ric enjoyed it all. At the end he went down before the blazing guns of the Federal Security Directorate. The credits rolled over the video-Ric's dead face. The director was listed as Jesus Carranza. The film was produced by VideoTek S.A. in collaboration with Messiah Media.

The star's name was given as Jean-Paul Marat.

"A new underground superstar," said a high voice. The voice of someone who thought of himself as an underground connoisseur. "He's been in a lot of pirate video lately. He's the center of a big controversy about how far scum shows can go."

And then the lights came on and Ric saw eyes turning to him in surprise. "It's not me," he said.

"Of course not." The voice belonged to his host. "Incredible resemblance, though. Even your mannerisms. Your accent."

"Not me."

"Hey." A quick, small man, with metal-rimmed glasses that gazed at Ric like barrels of a shotgun. "It really is you!" The high-pitched voice of the connoisseur grated on Ric's nerves like the sound of a bonesaw.

"No." A fast, sweat-soaked denial.

"Look. I've taped all your vids I could find."

"Not me."

"I'm having a party next week. With entertainment, if you know what I mean. I wonder—"

"I'm not interested," Ric said, standing carefully, "in any of your parties."

He walked out into the night, to his new car, and headed north, to his private fortress above the glacier. He took the pistol out of the glove compartment and put it on the seat next to him. It didn't make him feel any safer.

Get a new face, Ric thought. Get across the border into Uzbekistan and check into a hospital. Let them try to follow me there.

He got home at four in the morning and checked his situation with the artificial intelligence that managed his accounts. All his funds were in long-term investments and he'd take a whopping loss if he pulled out now.

He looked at the figures and couldn't understand them. There seemed to be a long, constant scream in Ric's mind and nerves, a scream that echoed Marlene's, the sound of someone who had just discovered what is real. His body was shaking and he couldn't stop it.

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Ric switched off his monitor and staggered to bed. Blood filled his dreams.

When he rose it was noon. There were people outside his gates, paparazzi with their cameras. The phone had recorded a series of requests for an interview with the new, controversial vid star. Someone at the party had talked. It took Ric a long time to get a phone line out in order to tell the AI to sell out.

The money in his pocket and a gun in his lap, he raced his car past the paparrazi, making them jump aside as he tried his best to run them down. He had to make the next suborbital shuttle out of Christchurch to Mysore, then head northwest to his hospital and to a new life. And somehow he'd have to try to cover his tracks. Possibly he'd buy some hair bleach, a false mustache. Pay only cash.

Getting away from Cartoon Messiah wouldn't be hard. Shaking the paparazzi would take a lot of fast thinking.

Sweat made his grip on the wheel slippery.

As he approached Christchurch he saw a streak across the bright northeast sky, a shuttle burning its way across the Pacific from California.

He wondered if there were people on it that he knew.

In his mind, the screams went on. ●

MARTIN GARDNER

(from page 63)

SOLUTION TO THE VANISHING PLANK

Although only half the plank has been removed, the plank has disappeared in the sense that no remaining piece has a length greater than zero! You can see this by considering the decreasing lengths of the segments that remain after each step. The first step leaves two segments of length ⅛. The segments get smaller and smaller after each step, their lengths approaching zero at the limit. In other words, after the Great Aleph has completed his task, no piece of the plank remains that has a length longer than zero. There is, therefore, nothing left to be seen. The plank has effectively vanished, even though half of its original substance is still there!

For a proof that the plank is still there, see page 183.

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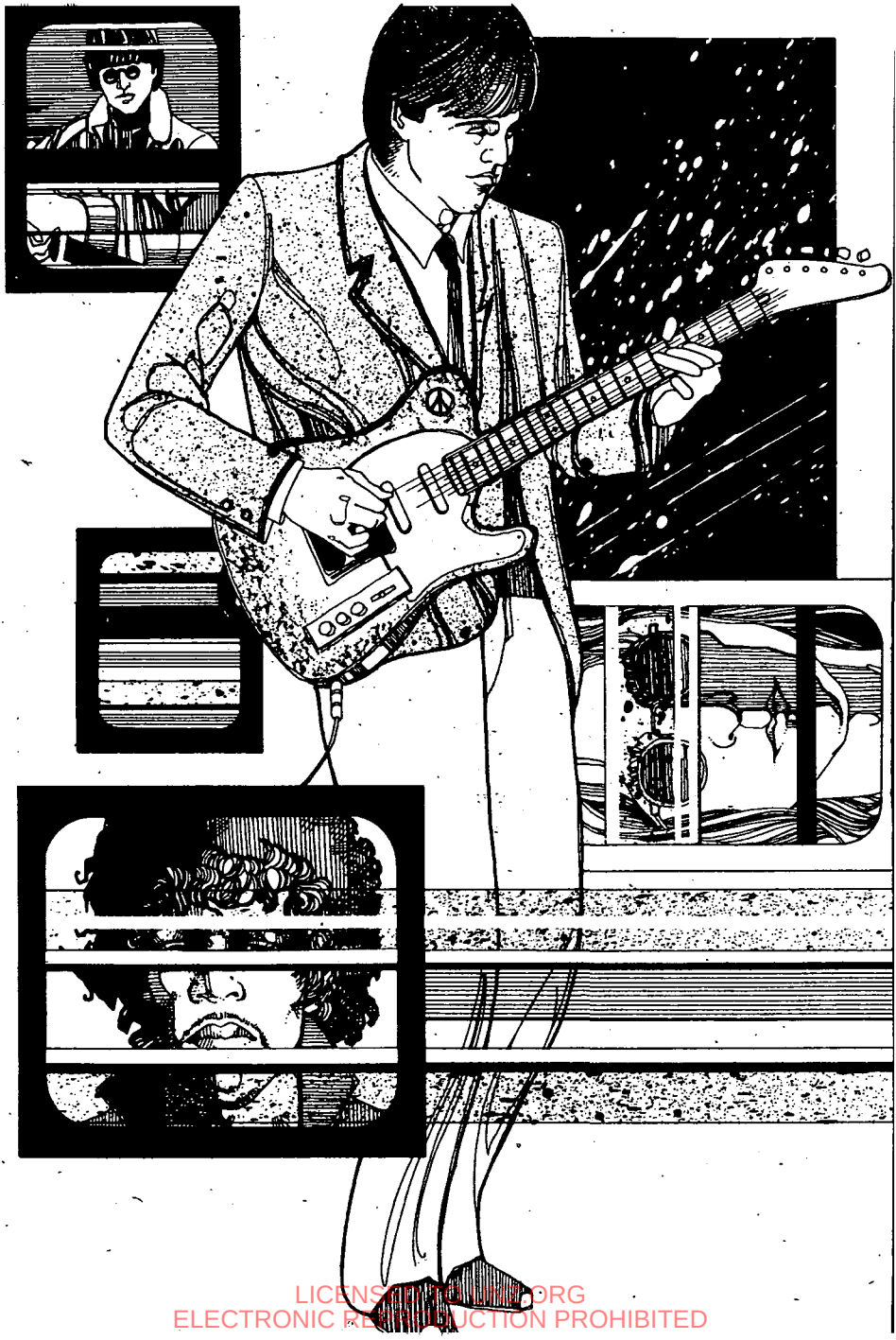

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by Andrew Weiner

THE BAND FROM THE PLANET ZOOM

art: George Thompson

The author's short story "Distant Signals" (which was published in *Twilight Zone Magazine)* has been filmed for the TV series "Tales from the Darkside." Mr. Weiner last appeared in these pages with the short story "Klein's Machine" (April 1985).

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They didn't really come from the planet Zoom, of course, but I could never get my tongue around where they did come from, and Zoom was close enough. Better, really. It sounded so much like a put-on that hardly anyone ever dreamed that we were serious. I had a hard time believing it myself, most of the time, and I was their manager.

Originally they had called themselves the Blueberries, not that any of them had ever seen or tasted a blueberry. It was my idea to call them The Band From The Planet Zoom. Well, not exactly an idea. It just sort of slipped out. I was at least half-drunk at the time, or I would have been more careful, but as it turned out it was all for the best.

It happened at one of our early club dates. I had invited some of my former colleagues from the rock press to take in the action. They lined themselves up skeptically at the bar while I bought the drinks, a transaction perhaps even more disconcerting for them than it was for me.

The rock hacks, as usual, were drinking too much because the drinks were free. I was drinking too much partly out of habit, but mainly because I was nervous. I was wondering what they would think of my protegees. The last few gigs had been just wonderful, but I was concerned that I might be pushing them along too fast.

I needn't have worried. The band started out with their Vanilla Fudge arrangement of "Eve of Destruction," slipped in an original that sounded like an out-take from *Beatles for Sale*, and then moved into their Mamas and Papas style "Wild Thing." By the time they got to their Four Tops version of the Left Banke's "Pretty Ballerina" the hacks were staring open-mouthed, drinks forgotten.

The Left Banke, I should perhaps explain, were an obscure two-hit wonder dating back to the mid-1960s. Their biggest claim to fame was that the Four Tops had covered the first and biggest of these hits, "Walk Away Renee." The Tops had never gotten around to the second. Not until now, at least. As the band played their instruments, the video screen behind them on the tiny stage showed them doing a perfect replica of a Four Tops dance routine. It was one of the silliest sights that could be imagined.

And the hits just kept on coming. Teri put down her bass guitar and stepped up to the microphone to do her eerily good early Marianne Faithfull impersonation on the Stones' "Satisfaction." It helped, of course, that she looked quite a lot like early Marianne Faithfull, but she had the voice down too. Then Frank switched from lead guitar to organ and led the band into their Bob Dylan/*Blonde on Blonde* style reworking of "She Don't Care About Time," a glorious but utterly obscure old Byrds b-side. And so it went on.

"Who are these guys?" asked Chuck Rickert, a staff writer over at *Record Universe*. "Where do they come from?"

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I had prepared a stack of press releases that told the story of the Blueberries and their nostalgic pilgrimage from Bloomington, Indiana to once-Swinging London, England. I had even sprung for a bunch of black-and-white glossies showing them taking in the sights on Carnaby Street. But I had left all that stuff in the truck, and I had forgotten most of the imaginary details. So I winged it. As I say, I was at least half-drunk.

"They're the band from the planet Zoom," I said. "Come two thousand light years to save the spirit of rock 'n' roll." It was a pretty good line, I thought, but I didn't mind giving it to Rickert. I was out of the rockcrit business myself, at least for a while.

Two thousand light years was pushing things a little, though. Two thousand light years and they would never have picked up our radio and TV signals and heard our rock 'n' roll in the first place. The way I figured it—and they were never very clear on this point—it was more like fifteen. If they had been much closer than fifteen light years, they would have been able to track what had happened to rock 'n' roll since the early 1970s—and they probably wouldn't have bothered to come. I wouldn't have, anyway.

"That's a good one," Rickert said, nodding his head in admiration as he scribbled in his notebook.

"The planet Zoom," I continued, "is situated in the Crab Nebula, I don't have the exact co-ordinates to hand. The inhabitants live in enormous sentient trees, which act as giant radio antennae in picking up radio transmissions from other star systems . . . "

It was a slow week for news, and the English pop press were hungry, as ever, for new sensations, no matter how idiotic. My story was certainly idiotic enough. And as for The Band From The Planet Zoom (as they would henceforth become known), they were . . . well, not *good* exactly. It wasn't a matter of good or bad. But they were certainly sensational, and even my jaded former colleagues could see it. Even *I* could see it, for that matter, and there were few rock hacks more jaded than myself.

So we got full-page spreads in two of the five leading pop weeklies, and a mention in a couple of others. Rickert did quite well for us, headlining his piece "Out of the Interstellar Garage" and dropping phrases like "cosmic cover band."

Over at *Music Nova*, the paper that catered to the rock intelligentsia, Nicky Far did even better, turning in an admirably impenetrable piece titled "The Alien Viewpoint," which leaned heavily on Barthes, Lévi-Strauss and Wittgenstein. He was especially taken with their version of "Pretty Ballerina," calling it "a new high in punk structuralism. Decomposing and recomposing the text the Zoomers explode our codes of

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sign and meaning . . . creating and destroying complex new mythologies at will."

I could hardly have done better myself. He would, I thought, be a good man to write the liner notes on our first Greatest Hits package.

And even before the papers hit the streets, the word-of-mouth had spread, and the record company A&R people came crowding around. And from there, of course, it was ever onwards and upwards.

It is hard for me, even now, to comprehend just how much my life has changed since the day I met The Band From The Planet Zoom.

I put down my paint brush and take a sip of my Campari and soda and gaze out of the window at the picture perfect wilds of the southern Italian countryside. I call my accountant in London and he confirms that, as usual, my funds have continued to multiply, flowing hither and thither across the globe in search of ever-higher returns, from T-bills to yen to Swiss francs to orange juice futures and back again. Sometimes, in the night, I think I can hear my money, rushing onwards like a mighty river flowing.

Things did not work out exactly as I might have wanted them to, but the money is at least somewhat consoling. Certainly I have come a long way from twenty pounds per thousand words.

Yet it did not start out as such a wonderful day, the day I met The Band From The Planet Zoom. As soon as I opened my eyes, in fact, I immediately regretted it. The hangover was quite as awful as I had anticipated, and my attempts to ward it off—several aspirins, and much water, on staggering home the night before—had proved entirely futile.

I cursed Righteous Records and their cheap Italian wine and their dreadful new heavy metal band, Power Drill. That was one album I yearned to reduce to vinyl dust.

I became aware that my front doorbell was ringing, had been doing so insistently for the past minute, had indeed awoken me from my restless slumber at the repulsively early hour of ten in the morning.

Groaning I climbed out of bed and picked my way towards the door through the chaos of clothes and record albums and ashtrays and empty cigarette packs and beer cans and other debris that covered the floor.

The man at the door was holding a record-shaped package, but he was not a postman. The uniform was the wrong color, and in any case no postman would have bothered to ring the bell for so long. He was a courier.

Furious, I grabbed the package, scrawled my signature on the delivery slip, and slammed the door in his face.

That was the problem with being a freelance rock writer. People were always bombarding you with free records and T-shirts and all sorts of

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crap. The records, at least, had some value. The going rate down at the local second hand store was one pound fifty pence. The T-shirts made okay dish towels.

I made myself some tea and took another couple of aspirins. Then I considered opening the package. It was possible that it held records sent for review by *Fast!*, the rock monthly to which I contributed many of my pearls of wisdom. Possible, but unlikely. *Fast!* was not much given to using couriers. Actually, it was a big day when they put on enough stamps to cover the full cost of the postage. More likely it was some record company with more money than sense, flacking every rock hack in town.

How could I have known that I, Rick Haas, had been selected from the thousands of swarming, striving rock critics to receive the only copy in existence, but for the master tape, of that astonishing missive? How could I have known that I, Rick Haas, was the favorite rock critic of a bunch of eccentric aliens?

Not that the competition was so terrific.

As I ripped open the cardboard packaging, a handwritten note fell to the floor.

Dick Rick, it read.

This record is not yet commercially available. This is a preview copy. We have much admired your writing, and would appreciate hearing your opinion on this.

That was all, except for an indecipherable signature and a phone number.

The record itself had a plain white cardboard sleeve. Inside were two single-sided acetates, labeled only "Side One" and "Side Two," and, in smaller print, "The Blueberries."

I groaned. I cursed. A demo. Not even worth a quid down at the record exchange.

And that note. So modest, so obeisant. Just what I needed: being asked to act as an unpaid PR man for a bunch of amateurs. No doubt they were expecting a full-length feature in *Fast!*

I considered dumping record and note into the trash. But I had misplaced the garbage can, and in any case morbid curiosity got the better of me. I put on side one, track one. And was immediately enthralled.

What I was listening to, I later discovered, was their Jimi Hendrix style arrangement of an old Fairport Convention song called "Meet On The Ledge," and I suppose I did recognize it on some level. The next track was immediately familiar as an old Rolling Stones song, circa 1964, except that to my knowledge it was no song that the Rolling Stones had ever sung. Then came Manfred Mann doing P.F. Sloan's "Sins of a Fam-

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ily" the way they used to do Dylan, except that they never had. And so it went on.

As I rode on the tube to Notting Hill, I wondered who exactly I was going to meet. My suspicion was that it would be a bunch of polite but thoroughly inscrutable Japanese kids. No one else, I thought, could copy so many different rock 'n' roll styles so perfectly, yet in such bizarre combinations. No one else would want to.

They turned out, however, to be boringly Caucasian and otherwise quite unremarkable, except for the matter of their hair and dress. The three male members of the band, who introduced themselves as Bill, Frank, and Tom, were dressed in mid-Sixties style suits with velvet collars and thin ties, and they affected the short-long hairstyle of the period, complete with fringes. Their one female member, Teri, the one who bore the more than passing resemblance to mid-Sixties Marianne Faithfull, was wearing a rather stunning purple mini-skirt which stimulated in me immediate nostalgia for times past, along with other emotions.

They told me that they had come from Bloomington, Indiana, but I could detect no trace of accent in their voices, none at all. They looked to be in their early twenties.

Their apartment was in a well-kept building at the fashionable end of the Portobello Road. It was large and tidy but almost completely devoid of furnishings. In the living room there were only a few cushions, scattered on the floor. The walls, however, were covered with old rock posters, a mammoth collage of Barry McGuire and Diana Ross, Bob Dylan and Geno Washington, and on and on. The choice was nothing if not eclectic.

They were anxious, of course, to hear my verdict.

"It's brilliant," I said, "except . . . "

I realized that I had not thought through my exception. I tried to marshal my critical faculties. What was the fatal flaw here? There always was at least one such flaw, it was simply a matter of putting your finger on it. I was operating on too little sleep, and with a still-raging hangover, but a good hack can work with even the most intractable material under the most adverse of circumstances.

"It lacks character," I said, finally. "There's no distinctive *voice*. That could be said, of course, of a lot of music. But you've taken matters to extremes. It's all style and no meaning at all. It misses the whole point of rock 'n' roll."

"What would that be?" asked the one who called himself Bill, and who looked a little like the younger John Fogerty. "What *is* the point?"

There was a definite eagerness in his voice.

"Well . . . " I began.

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I realized, suddenly, that I had forgotten the point, if indeed I have ever known it. I racked my brains, thumbing mentally through miles of yellowed newsprint.

"Rebellion," I said, groping. "Teen sexuality. Sense of community. Of shared identity. Like that . . . "

They stared at me, clearly waiting to hear more.

"Defining the frontier," I said, "in the intergenerational war. Developing a politics of everyday life. A shared code . . . "

I rubbed my eyes. What exactly had Greil Marcus said in *Creem* back in 1968? I had misquoted it often enough. Or had it been Jon Landau?

"The hell with it," I said finally. "You guys are going to make a million."

"You mean," Bill said, "that people would buy our records?"

"Yes," I said, feeling a little like Santa Claus handing out the presents. "Lots of them."

Except for the part about Bloomington, Indiana, almost everything they told me about themselves at that first meeting was true. They were all long-term, hard-core rock fans with a particular affection for the music of the 1960s. They had decided to form a band to play the kind of music they liked, and had financed the demo from their own funds. They had no management, and almost no knowledge of the music business, other than what they had gleaned from their reading of the rock press. They had yet to approach a record company.

Even then, though, there were parts of the story that did not quite compute. These kids had an encyclopedic knowledge of music made while they were still in nappies. They were also well-informed about the current scene, although they held it in fairly low esteem. But when the conversation turned to some of the developments in the industry between then and now, they were suprisingly ignorant.

"The Sex Pistols?" Frank asked me at one point. "Who were the Sex Pistols?"

Finally, they got around to asking me to be their manager. I had almost no qualifications for the job, and had never even contemplated such a career move in the past. Indeed, I hardly thought of what I did as being in any sense a career.

Yet it was time for a change, long past time. And besides, I was already a little in love with Teri, no doubt because she brought into play long suppressed adolescent Marianne Faithfull fantasies. Later, of course, I would come to love her for herself, or ar least to think that I did so.

I was easily persuaded.

I decided that the band would start up by playing a few club dates before approaching the record companies. I found that they could play

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their instruments well, but they had as much stage presence as a frozen dinner. And so we hired a rehearsal hall and worked to develop a stage act. I advised on the order of the songs, and made suggestions for new material.

Money appeared not to be a problem for them. They owned first-rate equipment. They paid me a regular salary from the start. They paid cash for a truck, and hired a full road crew. They were not your usual beginners band.

They were as vague about their source of funding as they were about their previous lives in Bloomington, Indiana.

Their ignorance of British history and culture was startling even for Americans.

"This Queen," Tom asked me, "do you elect her, or what?"

There were also strange gaps in their knowledge about their own supposed homeland. They had only the vaguest notion, for example, of the geographical relationship of New York to Los Angeles. Jimmy Carter was a mystery to them, and so was Stephen King. Yet they knew who had played bass on every Tamla record ever issued.

Finally I had decided to ask Teri. Our relationship had not yet developed in a romantic direction but already I felt closer to her than to the other members of the band. For all their unfailing politeness, there was something a bit impenetrable, a bit remote, about Frank, Bill, and Tom, although of course I could not have suspected how remote.

I took her out for lunch at a small Italian restaurant in Soho—I had told her that it was once a favorite of the Beatles—and for all I know it might have been—and posed the question directly.

"Where are you guys *from?*"

And so she told me.

It was perhaps a little better than my own worst-case scenario, that they were escapees from a mental institution. Yet I was not really prepared to accept her answer.

"You're putting me on," I told her, although I had never known any of them to lie about anything else, except, as it turned out, about Bloomington, Indiana.

"We thought it would make things simpler to pretend we were from around here," she said.

"New Zealand," I said. "Perhaps you should say you're from New Zealand. People might believe that."

"Actually," she said, "probably no one would believe we were from the planet Zoom."

Except she didn't say "Zoom."

"You're right," I said. "I'm not sure I do."

* * *

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Believe it or not—and at this point I suppose I *do* believe it—that was where they claimed to be from. Earth rock, they told me, was very big on the planet Zoom. They'd been tuning in to our radio signals since the 1920s, and there were some Zoomers who still grooved to the Glenn Miller sound. But it was rock 'n' roll that had really taken hold. All the kids loved it. If they were kids . . . I was never exactly clear on that point. There was, at least, some phase in the life cycle of the Zoomer at which they could really relate to the big beat, but whether at that point they were kids or senior citizens or something else again I could never really grasp, no matter how many times they tried to explain it to me.

The Zoomers, it seemed, had had faster-than-light interstellar travel for millennia, but they weren't big on tourism. They much preferred to stay home and tune in on the rest of the galaxy. They used some form of instrumentation to do this, by the way. I made up the part about the trees. They could pick up signals from several dozen planets, but Earth was the clear favorite. Reception was better, too.

So they listened and they watched. But somehow it wasn't enough. They craved more rock 'n' roll. And so they started to make it for themselves, just like rock fans right here on Earth. A bunch of kids would get together in a basement, or whatever passed for a basement on Zoom, and the beat would go on. As a species the Zoomers had never been great innovators. They hadn't invented much of anything, beyond a certain point. Even their space drive was given to them by visiting aliens. But they were terrific mimics.

And The Band From The Planet Zoom were the most terrific of all. They were, in fact, the biggest entertainment stars on their entire home world. If I understood them correctly, they were bigger than even the Beatles had been on Earth. Yet they regarded all that as small potatoes. They yearned to compete in the big league. And so they did.

To cut a long story short, The Band From The Planet Zoom was a wild success. The first album chased up the English charts, then did the same in the States even before we hit Shea Stadium. Shea was their idea, by the way, kind of a nostalgic pilgrimage.

The bigger they got, of course, the more media attention they received, and not just from the rock press. Yet for all the inevitable discussion of where they had *really* come from, no one tried that hard to find out. They took it all at face value, a funny put-on, good copy.

As for me, I was having the time of my life. I was managing the best little rock 'n' roll band in the world, maybe even the universe. And I was doing a pretty good job of it too. I hardly even drank anymore.

I was also romantically involved with an alien bass player and early

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Marianne Faithfull lookalike, although after awhile I didn't think of her in those terms. She was just Teri.

"I'm not sure if I should be doing this," she had said, after we had kissed for the first time, even though she had seemed just as enthusiastic as I was. We were in the back seat of the limo taking us back from a club. Bill, Frank, and Tom had gone their own ways that night, fortunately for me.

"Don't people do this on Zoom?" I had asked.

"Well yes. And no. It's a bit hard to explain."

"Is it Bill, then?" I asked. "Or Frank? Or Tom?"

I had often wondered about the exact nature of the relationship between the four of them.

She laughed out loud at the thought.

"Oh no," she said. "We're a . . . " She said an unpronounceable word. "Like brothers and sisters. Or anyway something like that."

"Then I don't see the problem."

And for a while there had been no problem, none at all.

Of course it was too good to last.

Bill had sounded agitated on the phone. When he arrived at the office he was holding the latest issue of *Music Nova*. He passed it over to me silently, pointing to a review of their latest album. I hadn't read it yet, but I had a good idea of what it would say. It said that The Band From The Planet Zoom were merely skilled mimics, regurgitating tired old rock clichés in apparently new forms, and that while this had once been amusing it had now become tiresome. It concluded by suggesting that they should just go stick their heads down the toilet and flush themselves away.

Except for the last line, which struck me as a bit unimaginative, I could have written that review myself. Probably I *would* have written it myself, if I was still in that line of work.

Lately they had been getting a lot of reviews like this one.

"I don't understand it," Bill said. "The critics used to love us."

"Critics have a very short attention span," I said. "They bore easily. If they can't build you up, they start pulling you down. It's normal. Don't worry about it. Screw the critics. Look at the charts."

At that very moment, The Band From The Planet Zoom stood at the top of both the album and singles charts on both sides of the Atlantic. They had even topped the U.S. country charts, with their cross-over folk-rock version of Woody Guthrie's "Grand Couley Dam." They were on top of the world.

"It's not enough," he said.

"What's not enough?"

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"Our success," he said. "It's empty. Hollow."

"I would say that it seems pretty solid."

"But it's not *creative*," he said. "We're not creative. We're not adding one iota of originality to the sum of rock 'n' roll. We're just refining and recombining things that other people have done."

"I suppose that's true," I said. "But it never bothered you before."

"It's not enough," he said again. "It's not creative, it's not authentic, there's no distinctive voice, no character. You were right from the start."

"A lot of bands," I said, "are like that. Either they start like that, or end up like that. Lose connection along the way. Run out of songs to play. But they keep on playing anyway, most of them."

"Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1968, 'Lodi,' " Bill said, automatically. But the point is, we were never connected in the first place. Never had any genuine roots."

Obviously he was serious about this. But I really didn't know what to suggest.

"Maybe," I said, "you could go back to your roots. Inject something of your background into your music. Something of Zoom."

"Zoom," Bill said, "is boring. Zoom is nowhere."

Despite my protests, The Band From The Planet Zoom canceled their forthcoming Far East tour. They built their own 16-track studio in a house in Beverly Hills and withdrew into total seclusion. No one was allowed in there, not even me.

I missed Teri horribly.

"I'm sorry," she told me. "This was a group decision. This is something we really have to work out for ourselves."

I spent some time in London, and some more time in Italy. Out of sheer boredom I began to paint again, for the first time in ten years. I spoke to the band on the phone from time to time, but they were evasive when I asked how things were going.

"All right," Frank would say, or Bill, or Tom, "I think it's going all right."

Teri was no more forthcoming, although we talked a lot about other things. I told her about the house I had found in Italy, and she said she was looking forward to seeing it.

This went on for months. And then finally they summoned me to L.A. to hear the masterwork. They sat around me in the huge living room as it boomed from the speakers, watching my reactions. Reactions I was trying very hard to mask. Almost from the first note it was wretched. Really rotten. Boring, pointless, pretentious drivel.

Oh, there were flashes here and there of the old Zoomers. Even a potential chart single, if you pared out the five minute instrumental

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passage and cleaned up the vocals. But these were mostly accidental. They had set out determined to create something entirely original, something completely new under this or any other sun, and for the most part they had succeeded. It was just unfortunate that it was virtually unlistenable.

When the tape ended I asked to hear it again. It was, if anything, worse the second time around. Finally came the moment I dreaded.

"Well," Frank asked. "What do you think?"

"It's interesting," I said. "Courageous . . ." I trailed off. "What the hell. It stinks."

Frank nodded. "That's what we thought."

"You tried too hard," I said. "Tried to be something you're not. You are who you are."

"Clever copyists," Bill said. "A cosmic cover band."

"But there's nothing really new in rock," I said. "Not really new. What is rock 'n' roll anyway? Just the same chords and riffs and stuff rotated endlessly. You could make a pretty good argument to that effect."

I was straining, though, and they could hear it.

"There's always something new in the music," Bill said. "Something of the performer. If you're going to leave a real mark."

"You've already made a mark."

"Five years from now, who will remember?"

"Five years from now you can still be at the top," I said. "You've barely scratched the surface so far."

"I'm sorry, Rick," Teri told me, from across the room. "That isn't going to happen. You see, we've decided. We're going home."

"When?" I asked. "When did you decide? You only just heard my opinion."

They looked from one to another, but no one offered to explain. Somehow they didn't need to. I had always thought they had an uncanny ability to communicate with one another, one which went beyond words, and now I knew that for sure.

"Don't be so hasty," I said. "We should talk about this some more."

But Frank shook his head.

"It's like Teri told you," he said. "We all decided. I'm sorry, Rick, but we can't go on with this. It just isn't . . . *fun* any more."

Teri did come to stay with me in my house in Italy before they left.

"It's charming," she told me. "Wonderful. We have nothing like this."

"Stay here," I told her. "Stay with me. You can be a solo act. Or we can just give up the business altogether, Christ knows we can afford to."

"I can't," she said. "Please don't ask me that."

"What will I do?" I asked. "What am I going to do without you?"

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"You'll get over it," she said. "You'll find something else to do with your life. Find another band. Or paint, perhaps." She indicated the half-finished painting sitting on the easel. "I think that's really quite good."

"I'm not talking about the band," I said. "I'm talking about you and me."

"I can't stay," she said. "I just can't, even if I wanted to. Me and Bill and Frank and Tom, we're a . . . " And she used the same unpronounceable word I had heard in that little Soho cafe. I realized now that its meaning was a little stronger than "brothers and sisters."

"We have to stay together," she told me. "That takes precedence always, even over . . . over bonding relationships."

"But you're on Earth now," I said. "We do things differently here. You can adjust, adapt. You're like us in every other way already, after all."

"Not really," she said. "You see, this isn't really me. This is just the form I've taken here. Back home I don't look like this at all. Except when we perform, of course."

I realized, then, that I had suspected something like this all along, but had done a very good job of repressing the idea. She had seemed entirely human to me in every way that counted.

"What do you look like?" I asked.

"I knew this was a mistake," she said. "I knew I shouldn't have allowed myself . . . "

"What do you look like?" I asked, again.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "The point is, you think you love me but you don't really. You love only what you think you see."

"That's true in any relationship," I said. "We all have illusions about other people. That's part of being in love."

"I wouldn't know about that," she said. "But I do know about us. It's like the music, really, our relationship. It's all style, all appearance, and we should keep it that way. You wouldn't love the real me. You couldn't possibly."

"How terrible could it be?" I asked. "After all, you were able to love me. Or at least, you said you did. If we're as different as you're suggesting, how could that be possible?"

"We're more cognitively flexible," she said. "We've been exposed to a greater variety of life forms, and we're able to imitate many of them. We have a much greater capacity for aesthetic appreciation even of very different morphologies."

"But I couldn't handle it, is that what you're saying?"

"No," she said. "You couldn't."

"Yes I could," I said, desperate. "Try me."

She resisted, but I persisted. Finally, at the end of that last week together, she gave in.

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"This is another mistake," she warned me. "This is not how you want to remember me."

And so she showed me her real form. And, sad to say, she was right, and I was wrong. I could not handle it, I could not love the real her, it was all I could do to stay in the same room. Sad, and despicable, but true all the same.

Let me leave it at that. I see no point in going into prurient and still painful detail.

They were indeed very clever copyists.

So The Band From The Planet Zoom packed their bags, such as they were, and returned to their native world. Or at least, I have no reason to believe otherwise. And these days nobody much thinks about them, except maybe to wonder whatever happened to them.

I remember them, of course, and particularly Teri, the way I knew her and the way I last saw her. It took me a long time to get over Teri, and in a certain sense I never did.

But even I hardly play their records anymore. For that matter, I hardly ever listen to rock 'n' roll.

I'm retired from the business, you see. I don't manage rock bands and I certainly don't write about them. I made a good deal of money from my involvement with The Band From The Planet Zoom, and I got good advice on investing it. I don't have to work another day in my life, and almost certainly I won't.

Instead, I paint. It was something I always wanted to do, but never had the time for before. Back in school the art teachers always said that I had talent, at least as a draftsman, although I was a little lacking in imagination.

I paint in my villa in southern Italy. I paint very much in the style of my idols, de Chirico and Magritte. I'm getting pretty good at doing de Chirico, but I'm still having trouble with Magritte.

One of these days, I tell myself, I'm going to paint something really original. One of these days.

But I would not call it a burning ambition, and I will not be deeply disappointed if I fail. There are worse things, after all, than being a stylish and clever copyist.

Much worse things. ●

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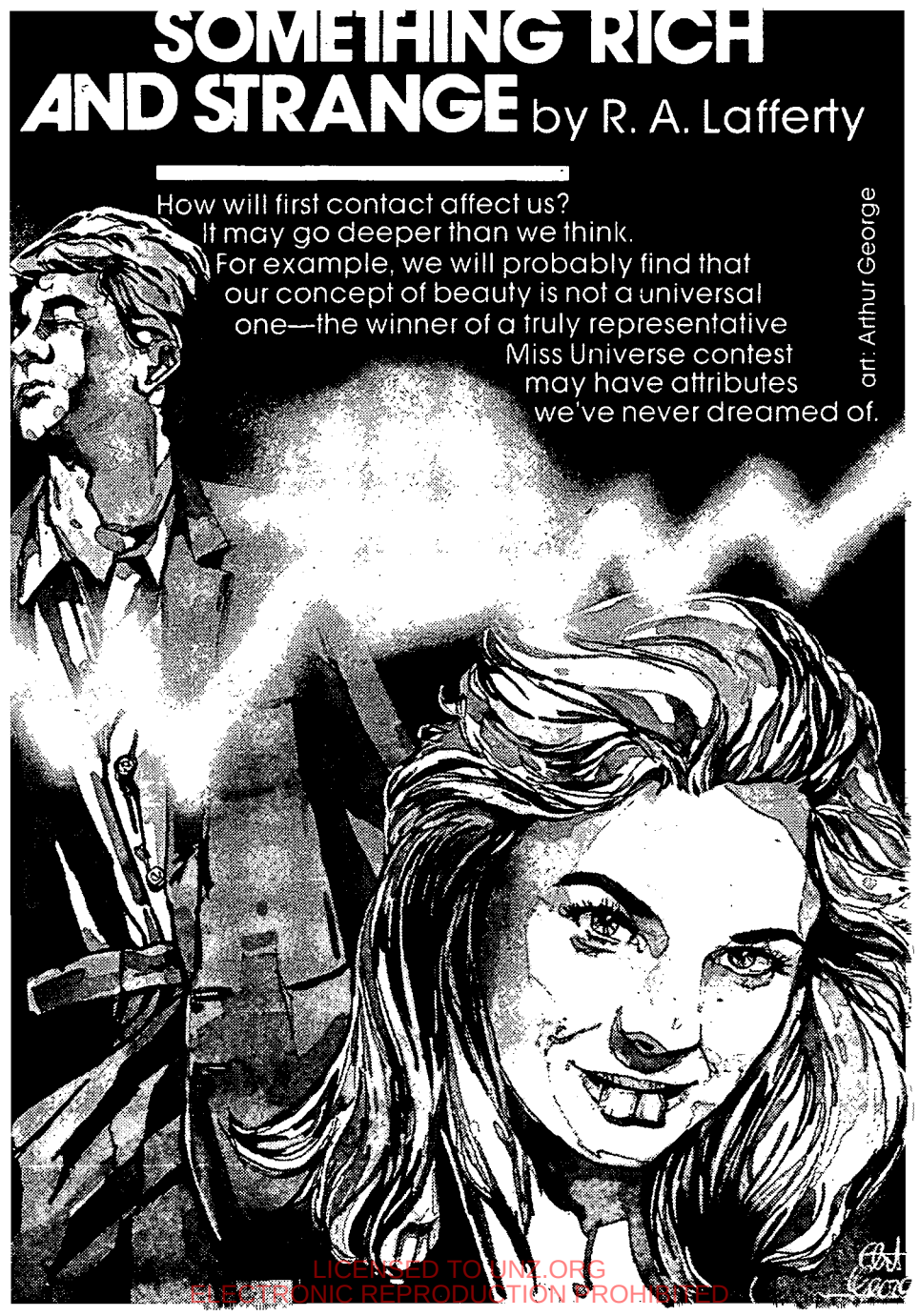
SOMETHING RICH AND STRANGE by R. A. Lafferty

How will first contact affect us?
It may go deeper than we think.
For example, we will probably find that
our concept of beauty is not a universal
one—the winner of a truly representative
Miss Universe contest
may have attributes
we've never dreamed of.

art: Arthur George



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I am the biggest and the best,
I'm full of jive and juices.
I wear my heart outside my breast.
My teeth are like a moose's.
Buck Tooth Boogie, Anonymous.

George Dander had two front buck teeth bigger than those of any other man or beaver or bull moose in the world. George Dander heard voices, a recent circumstance with him. George Dander was conditionally engaged to an enlarging and charming person named Mary Deare. Except for those three items, he was much like everybody else, pleasant, prodigal, talkative, a bit eccentric, opinionated, and mistaken fifty-one percent of the time.

Except for his two buck teeth he was handsome, and he was larger and louder than life. Except for the voices he'd been hearing, he had never had any self-doubts at all: but the new voices did have a doubtful quality to them. Except for Mary Deare (a metamorphic creature who was sometimes called the Unwreckable Mary Deare) his life might have been as empty as are the lives of so many billions of other persons.

Three other young men were also engaged to Mary. The conditions she had imposed on George Dander were that he should get rid of those damned buck teeth, and that he should make a million dollars. He could probably make a million dollars if he put his mind to it. But he sure didn't want to get rid of his buck teeth which were his trademark and his manhood. Ah well, the conditions that Mary Deare had put on her other three fiancés were even more stringent.

When the voices first came to George Dander he had trouble understanding them because of their foreign accent. But he and the voices soon adjusted to each other. The voices seemed to be right in the middle of George's head and nobody except himself could hear them—except, apparently, the sharp-eared Mary Deare a little bit sometimes.

But when George was alone (alone with the voices, for he was never really alone since they came to him) he questioned them.

"Who are you really?" he asked them. "What is your name?"

"Our name is Multitude because there are many of us," they answered him.

"That line has been used before, approximately," George told them. "Where are you really, the rest of you? Wherever in the world are you?"

"We are not in this world at all," they said. "The Name of our world is Synnephon-Ennea or Cloud-Nine Planet. Its direction from here is celestial north."

"Why do you send your voices here?"

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"Because we're friendly. We like to talk to all sorts of people. And we like to upgrade the ideas of all sorts of people."

"Do you ever visit any other worlds in person, in the flesh?"

"Oh yes. Perhaps we will visit your world in some very near future: after we have made preparations and shaped the public apperceptions there so we won't appear too shocking to you."

"Why did you pick me to talk in my head?"

"We always seek good paired receptors. Really, we have to have them or we can't make ourselves heard at all. In you we found one of the three best sets of paired receptors on your world. It's a joy to make contact with such an excellent set of receptors as yours."

"You mean my buck teeth? Do I pick you up through my buck teeth?"

"Yes. Does such a thing startle you?"

"Not entirely. There's a bull moose in the Bronx Zoo who picks up radio programs with his buck teeth. He mostly gets New York City boogie music programs, and the nearby animals listen appreciatively to them too. I had guessed that my case was something like that."

"When we come into our kingdom there in your world, one of the first things we will suppress is boogie radio stations. And in the meanwhile we will work through you and through others (especially your girlfriend who has an exceptionally good opportunistic brain) to try to upgrade this world's ideas of beauty. That will have to be done before the time of our coming. Now, to show our friendship, is there anything we can do to make you happier?"

The seven answers had been in seven different voices.

"Can you see into the future?" George Dander asked them.

"We can't see into our own future, but we can see into yours. Our temporal direction is the opposite of yours. Our past is your future. Our future is your past. What would you like to know?"

"The names of the eight horses who will win the eight races at Blue Ribbon Downs this afternoon."

"Gilded Lily in the first." "Red Beans in the second." "Cactus Joe in the third." "Fly-by-Night in the fourth." "Bangabout in the fifth." "Copperhead in the sixth." "Gandy Dancer in the seventh." "Burglar Dan in the eighth." The eight answers came in eight different voices.

George Dander picked up the phone and placed the eight bets, each horse to win in its race. But he was a little bit doubtful of what he had done.

"Even granting that you've been in the future where the races will be run this afternoon, how could you have all the winners' names so glibly?" he asked.

"We're smart," one of the voices said.

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"And if your past is my future and your future is my past, how come we are together so long? Why haven't we passed in less than a moment?"

"We will always be in the same present, but we will always have arrived at that present from opposite directions," a voice said.

"And if Cloud-Nine World (usually regarded as legendary) is four-and-a-half light years from here (even as a legend it is firmly located in the Centauri system) why isn't there a four-and-a-half year delay in every exchange of ours?"

"There's an explanation, but it's pretty mathematical and we don't believe you could understand it," one of the voices said.

All eight of the horses that George Dander bet on did win their races at Blue Ribbon Downs that afternoon, and George was ahead quite a few bucks. Mary Deare met George as he came back to his house after picking up his winnings. She knew all about it, and she couldn't have known.

"Don't relax, George, don't even think of relaxing," she said. "Have your voices give you the names of the one hundred stocks that will rise most sharply tomorrow. While you're getting them down, I'll phone your broker to have supper with us at the Steak and Ale. And draw a check for twenty thousand dollars, and we'll get our order to buy in to your broker tonight."

"I don't have twenty thousand dollars, Mary."

"Yes you do, honey. You have twenty thousand two hundred and eleven dollars and nineteen cents in your checking account. Why do you try to conceal things from me when we are conditionally engaged and are practically flesh of one flesh?"

Thirty-three days later, after hectic betting and buying and selling and manipulating futures with never a slip, George Dander was a millionaire. Mary Deare knew that he had reached it before George knew it himself. She had a quicker mind and she kept closer track of such things.

"We'll get married at nine o'clock tomorrow morning," she told George. "It's all working out beautifully."

"Good, good," George said. "Then you're waiving the other requirement."

"I'm waiving nothing. You have an appointment with the dentist in twenty-two minutes. We'd better get down there now. We're going to get those unsightly buck teeth jerked out of your mouth."

"But, Mary, don't you realize that I, we, wouldn't be millionaires if it weren't for my buck teeth and my voices? You're killing the golden goose, the golden fleece, the golden buck teeth!"

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"Trust me, honey! I always know what I'm doing. I'm not killing that golden goose. I'm going to put it on a business basis."

The dentist pulled George Dander's two priceless buck teeth which were one of the three best sets of paired receptors in the world. And George felt terrible about it.

"Don't let them throw them away!" he protested as he came out from under the gas. "Maybe something can be done with them if—"

"They won't be thrown away," Mary Deare reassured him. "My, you do talk funny without them! I have them here in my purse. I told you that I was going to put them on a business basis. Come along now. We'll get married in the morning, and then we'll go on a two-day honeymoon."

"Why only a two-day honeymoon?" George Dander asked. (He sure *did* talk funny without his buck teeth.) "Why for only two days?"

"Because *I* have a dental appointment on the third day," Mary Deare said.

2.

Nothing of her that does fade
But does suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-Nymphs hourly ring her knell
Ding-Dong—
Hark, I hear them,
Ding-Dong Bell!

The Tempest, Shakespeare

George Dander had mixed feelings at his wedding. He had a great and worrisome emptiness in the front of his mouth, and he had an awkward and floppy upper lip that was now relieved of its job of at least partly covering his buck teeth. He felt somewhat unmanned.

On the other hand, he was marrying the Unwreckable Mary Deare, an enchanting creature, a metamorphic creature, a pearl beyond price ("That paltry million dollars is only the beginning, honey," she had whispered to him, "we'll be *big* rich"), the Iris goddess at the end of the rainbow. It should be fun. And perhaps he *would be* more handsome without his big buck teeth (which would now, somehow, be put on a business basis).

And it *was* fun, for the two days of their honeymoon. They went to Bald Eagle Cove on Keystone Lake. They ate crawfish tails and Gored Ox Surprise and drank Boilermakers and Sazarac Cocktails. They water-skied and caught catfish and made love. One night they went to a movie

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at Mannford, and the other night they went to a cow-pasture Rock Concert near New Prue. Yes, all these things were fun when done with the metamorphic Mary Deare.

And they came back on the morning of the third day because Mary Deare had a dental appointment that day.

George Dander was absolutely dumbfounded by the appearance of his cherished wife Mary Deare Dander when she came back from the dentist's.

"No, no, no!" he said (or he made a pitiful attempt at saying). Try to say "No, no, no" with your two front teeth out: try to say *anything* with your two front teeth out. "Never, never!" George declared, and he was shaking like a whole treeful of aspen leaves. "Thomebody thay it ithn't tho!" he begged.

"You'll get used to them, honey," the unwreckable Mary Deare assured him.

"*Really* you will, George," sounded a muffled voice that used to be one of George Dander's own "voices," and it was coming somehow from Mary Deare's mouth. "It is essential that you not only get used to them, but that you learn to love them, that you come to find them things of beauty. You *do* understand that this world's ideas of beauty will have to be upgraded before the time of our coming."

George Dander tried to scream, but it was somehow pathetic. (Try to scream effectively sometime with your two front teeth gone and your upper lip flapping loosely.)

And George Dander began to run, and he disappeared over the horizon still running.

His was surely an odd reaction to his wife's coming home with two large and handsome buck teeth gleaming in the front of her face in place of six smaller upper front teeth that had never done much for her.

But George Dander had always been a little bit eccentric.

George Dander came home again after about a month.

"Oh, hi, George!" his wife Mary Deare spoke pleasantly. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too," George said, but he didn't really see her. He couldn't yet stand to look at her. One glimpse out of the corner of his eye was enough. George Dander was tired and dirty and discouraged.

"You'll feel better when you get your bridge with your two new teeth from the dentist," Mary Deare Dander said. "They've been ready for you for a month. He fitted you for them when you were still out from the gas when he pulled your two buck teeth. You will be nice-looking when you

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have two ordinary-sized front teeth and your upper lip has unextended itself."

"I will be nice-looking then, but I won't be me," George Dander said. "Mary, let me give you a little history of the world, and of my family, and of my teeth.

"When the great Indo-Aryan migration from central Asia to Europe began thirty centuries ago, its languages and words began to diverge. Of their original words, only about a hundred are still to be recognized in most of its branches. There isn't any common word for ocean, for they hadn't lived on the ocean. There isn't any common word for elephant or palm tree for they didn't know these things before their split-up. But there is a common word for teeth, for all of them had teeth. It was *don'di* in Greek, *dens* in Latin, and *dantis* in Lithuanian. It is *dent* in French and *diente* in Spanish. The word isn't recognized in English, but we still have *dental* and *dentist*. It is *tand* in Dutch and Scandinavian. With the greatest tribe of all of them (and there are now less than a hundred members of our 'tribe' left in the world) the word for tooth is *dand* and its plural is *dander*. So my name is George Dander which is George Teeth, and my family name has been 'teeth' for a hundred generations. We've always known that our buck teeth were receptors, part of the 'ivory grapevine.' People with *outstanding* teeth have always been in rapport with each other and have known each others' thoughts. Outsiders who noticed this didn't understand it and they thought that it was telepathy at work. Our buck teeth have been handed down from father to son (but never has any female member of the Dander family shown any signs of buck-teethism) for a hundred generations, growing always larger and more beautiful, and they climaxed in me. This isn't the first time we have picked up voices from the stars with our front teeth. But now I am shorn of them."

"Poor George!" the unwreckable Mary Deare said. "But look at it *this* way. Your wonderful teeth are in good hands now, which is to say in good mouth now, mine. Now *my* name is teeth, and the line won't be broken. Your son, of whom I am gravid now, will have the finest buck teeth ever in the history of the world."

"The fact is, George," said a muffled voice that had been one of George's own "voices" a month before, "we needed good paired receptors *combined* with brains, with *opportunistic* brains, to use for our deployments. You had the good paired receptors. Mary Deare had the fine opportunistic brains. So we made a deal."

"And now, honey, we will be rich beyond your fondest expectations," Mary Deare told George.

"I no longer have any fond expectations," George Dander said sadly, and he went away again.

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But Mary Deare Dander thrived. Those first couple of million dollars had been only peanuts. Now, with the aid of the "voices" she became fabulously rich, and in exchange for it she had only to become a sort of famous role model.

"Some of them laughed at me for a while, at the way I looked," she said. "But they laughed at me to their peril. Laughing people, do you ever know who *really* owns the company from which you have your living? It is dangerous to laugh at the richest woman in the world." For, by the time that Mary Deare Dander gave birth to George Dander the one-hundred-and-first (Oh, the buck teeth on that new-born baby!) she really was the richest woman in the world, and in three more days she would be the richest person in the world.

There is nothing so unpredictable as the changes in fads and fashions, especially the fads and fashions of beautiful women. And one of the strangest fashions ever to be taken up was the *Dente Sporgente* Look (pronounce it Dentay Sporgentay). Who would believe that the *Dente Sporgente* Look would be equated with having chic, with having elegance, with having total charm?

Indeed, Marcel Buffon, the greatest beauty expert in the world, writing in the French fashion magazine Lendemain Elegant, wrote "The new *Dente Sporgente* Look is like nothing ever seen before. It is something new in beauty, it is something new in excitement, it is something new in bla." It is true that this was the last thing that Marcel Burron ever wrote, for immediately after writing that he opened his veins and died. He had always been a puzzling man.

But the *Dente Sporgente* Look (the English translation of that wonderful and untranslatable name would be the "Protruding Teeth Look") was in. No, you wouldn't have guessed in a hundred guesses that the great new world-wide fashion of that year would be the stylish and beautiful women of the world, millions and millions of them, all having their six upper front teeth pulled out and replaced by a pair of huge buck teeth, implanted in the bone and growing there (they wouldn't be good receptors unless they were growing from the bone because good receptors require the complete bone skeleton to serve as an antenna). And you wouldn't have guessed in a hundred-and-one guesses that these women would universally be regarded as ravishingly beautiful after the toothy change had been made in them. Whoever effected such a change anyhow, and by what means? (Ah, the *Dente Sporgente* was almost something new in newness.)

It isn't certain who effected it, but the person who turned the greatest profit from it was that richest woman in the world, that metamorphic

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creature, Mary Deare Dander. Of the three thousand companies and corporations that she now owned, three hundred of them were part of the Buck Tooth Cartel.

One day, a gnarled and knobby space-traveler who happened to be on World for a short stopover, saw Mary Deare Dander herself, and he reeled back aghast.

"It is one of the natives of Synnenephon-Ennea on Cloud-Nine Planet," he groaned, "the most repulsive creatures in the Universe. If they have already begun to arrive here, then World would be better off to die the death."

"But Cloud-Nine Planet is usually deemed to be a legendary place," said the travel agent who was expediting the space-traveler, "and it's also said that it is impossible to go to it or leave it."

"Cloud-Nine Planet is approximately as real as this planet here under my feet, and it is about as easy to get to or leave. Of course, one must always arrive at Cloud-Nine from the future because it's in a time-reversal eddy. But it's real, and one can go to and from it with a little trickery. Ugh, isn't she ugly!"

"She is accounted the most beautiful woman on World," the travel-agent said.

"I see now that she is *not quite* a Cloud-Nine person yet," the space-traveler mused. "But she is a metamorphic, and she is turning into a Cloud-Nine person. If one isn't already a Cloud-Nine person, one will become such after a bit of trafficking with the Cloud-Niners. The Cloud-Niners are real, but they destroy the reality of every world they infest."

And then the old space-traveler seemed to be literally pulled apart. His four limbs and his head were all separated from his torso by giant and invisible hands, so it seemed. Old space-travelers often talk too much and they suffer the consequences of talking too much. The travel-agent, being a fastidious man, disassociated himself from the scattered remains of the old space-traveler and walked stiffly away.

The "voices" from Cloud Nine Planet now had about fifty million good paired receptors that they could use on World, and that was about all they needed for right now.

Beaver teeth, wild stallion teeth, moose and elk most of all! How could there have been enough of them to satisfy the demand? If the price is set high enough, there will always be enough, either genuine or counterfeit.

The only still living giant Irish elk in the world had its two front teeth torn out of its mouth in the Dublin zoo one night. "Shame, Shame, Shame," read the headlines of all the Irish papers, but that pair of giant

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elk buck teeth was known to bring a hundred and fifty thousand dollars on the black market.

Behemoth teeth were the best of all, matched pairs of behemoth front teeth.

But the behemoth is a fabulous creature.

So are the prices for its buck teeth fabulous.

You say that the behemoth front teeth are really plastic and cost only thirty-five cents a pair to produce? Well, with a base price of thirty-five cents, and approximately a hundred thousand dollars a sale going into advertising and hype, a million dollars a throw for them still yields a tidy profit for somebody, somebody named Mary Deare Dander.

Somewhere in distant Space and Time
Is wetter water, slimier slime,
And there (we trust) there swimmeth one
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent, and kind.
Rupert Brooke

Mary Deare Dander now had large and glittering thousand-facet insect-type eyes. They would have appeared very ugly to anybody who was born before yesterday, but there were now no such persons. Now everybody was wearing a button that read "I was born anew this morning." Such persons will soon come to accept and even love thousand-faceted, ugly, insect-type eyes. At least a dozen of the facets of the strange eyes were meaningful, for with them Mary could focus in on scenes on a dozen different worlds including Cloud-Nine Planet. This might be an advantage some time. The enlarged eyes were too big to remain in Mary's head, so now they were two throbbing, living, baseball-sized, bloodshot-in-seven-colors eyes on the front of Mary Deare's face.

These new eyes would be the next fashion for the beautiful women of the world, the Augen-Laugen or Lye-in-the-Eye look. Already such orbs were being installed in leading ladies at a million dollars a throw, and both the numbers of them and the price would pick up. Oh yes, objectively they were very ugly, but who was still objective nowadays? Their introduction was part of the upgrading of the sense of beauty for the people of World, the upgrading that would have to be completed before the Cloud-Nine people themselves could appear.

George Dander, when he left home that second time, believed that he would never laugh again. And he did not laugh again until a year and

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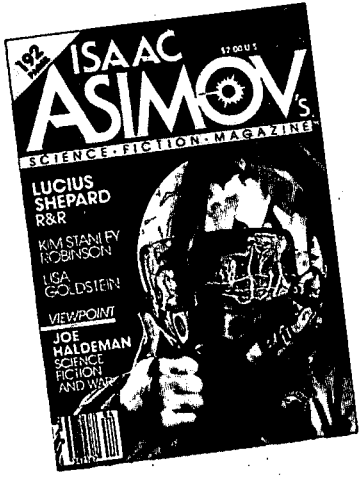

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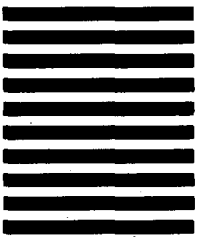

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a day after his wedding. Then one aspect of the happenings struck him as very, very droll.

(Hippopotamus front teeth, they were still going well now. They hadn't much shape or style, but they *were* mouth-fillingly *big*. They were second class, but there was always a strong market for the second class. And the most important dealer in the world in hippopotamus front teeth was the metamorphic Mary Deare Dander.)

"I wonder what the 'voices' really look like!" George Dander chortled in glee when the droll mood hit him one day. (Try to chortle some time without any front teeth.) "If they have to effect 'upgradings' of this world's ideas of beauty, like these present capers of theirs, before they can appear at all, boy-o-boy-o-boy! what must they really look like!"

"Music has charms to soothe a savage breast," the great Congreve wrote three hundred years ago, and the music that charmed the savage breasts of the worldlings in that season was a series of very strange tunes and songs. One of them had the strange name "Five Footfalls; glooch, klownk, geeze, klupple, bonk" and the name was far from the strangest thing about that song. Well, it was a real recording of the footsteps of the people of Cloud-Nine Planet. The five-legged persons of Cloud-Nine Planet had their five feet and legs all different, and those were the sounds of their footfalls when they walked. And wordlings would have to get used to the sound and the fact of the Cloud-Niners walking before the Cloud-Niners arrived. World persons could not help listening to such strange pieces of music as this. Some people found those sounds delightful and enchanting. And some people quivered with fear at the sound of the murderously stalking, fearsome, five-footed Cloud-Niners.

Mary Deare Dander now practiced an hour a day at walking on five different sorts of stilts at the same time. Mary Deare had become a prototype and a role-leader at many things.

The metamorphosis of Mary Deare was coming along nicely, and all the substance of it came to her over the ivory grapevine and through the dozen special facets of her thousand-faceted eyes.

She was the richest and most beautiful person in the world, and the most enchantingly strange.

Oh noble teeth and noble eyes
Beyond all reasoned uses!
None other like her shall arise
In land of Golden Gooses.

Buck Tooth Boogie.

* * *

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And how was the visit of the Cloud Nine people when they finally came?

It was cryptic: that is the only word for it. But it did fulfill the Niners' old crab-tree Latin motto: "*Eveneunt, Eridiunt, Exiviunt*" which is rendered "They arrived, they laughed, they departed again."

The Cloud-Niners had specified only a medium-sized meeting hall and, adjoining it, a spacious withdrawing room with padded floor and walls.

Only one hundred world people saw them at all, and that for only a few moments. The Cloud Nine people were clad in a neutral sort of space vestiture and were normal of teeth and eyes and feet. Well yes, the only way you could describe them was as "Squamous, omnipotent, and kind."

The one hundred VIP worldlings were splendid with hippopotamus teeth and thousand-faceted giant insect eyes. And they were wobbly on five-stilted asymetric contraptions.

Mary Deare Dander, of course, was the spokesperson for the worldlings.

"Our meeting is of the highest historical importance—" she began, and each of the Cloud-Niners pointed a finger at one of the Worldlings. The sign probably meant "Prodigious Welcome" or something like that.

"Let history stand still and be humbled," Mary Deare was saying. "This is the first moment of a new era."

The Cloud-Niners were absolutely twinkling and gurgling with some sort of delight or anticipation. They pointed their fingers at the worldlings again, and several of them seemed on the verge of speaking. But then all of them rushed into the padded withdrawing room, and you wouldn't believe what happened there!

They leapt and tumbled and beat their heads on the padded floor and walls. They laughed and laughed and laughed with a whooping rowdiness which is a little bit beyond the capacity of humans. What an orchestration of laughter! It was like ten million of those old milk cans banging down ten million steps of a celestial stairway. It was like a million donkeys laughing at one of the seven outrageous donkey jokes.

Twice the Nine-Clouders controlled themselves a little bit and came back into the hall with the worldlings.

"This is First Encounter," Mary Deare Dander spoke around her hippopotamus teeth. "This is—"

But the Cloud-Niners each pointed a finger at a worldling, and then rushed into the padded withdrawing room again overcome with a high hilarity about something.

And then, after an especially loud hurricane of merriment, the Cloud-Niners all went up through the ceiling in that droll way of theirs, and entered into hover-cars that they had whistled down from the low sky. Then they were gone, and their laughter fell like hunks of happy thunder down onto the earth.

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Yes, the visit of the Cloud-Niners would have to be called "cryptic." That's the only word for it.

Of course the laughter of the Cloud-Niners had all been recorded. And of course an attempt at decoding it was made. There would surely be treasures of information to be got from it when it was properly interpreted. And of course Mary Deare Dander was in charge of the great project. Well, who would *you* put in charge of it? Who else had sufficient prestige to head such a world-wide project?

But as yet the "Project Decode Laugh" has not born significant fruit.

The "Niners" were pleasant and squamous and stout,
But what in the hell were they *laughing* about?
Buck Tooth Boogie. ●

GAMING

(continued from page 14)

player, and new motions are drawn from the deck, face up, so everyone knows the agenda for the next meeting.

As might be imagined, plotting and planning are as important in the game as combat, maybe more so. I could imagine a troop-poor, concession-free player conniving his way to become the King.

A Royal Pretender can appear on the board through the Fate cards that players draw before beginning movement. Capturing a Pretender adds votes to the lucky Baron. Barons can also garrison captured cities (to improve their defensive strength) and cities can even be razed by a fleeing Baron. If a noble should die in battle, the next in his line is activated at the noble's castle. (That is, unless a Fate card has ordained that the noble is the last in his line.) And, as in any good wheeling and dealing game of back stabbing, all kinds of loans and alliances are of course permitted.

Winning? Ah, I almost forgot. The Baron who controls more than half the unrazed cities of the Kingdom is the winner and Lord of the Empire.

Games Workshop has carved out an interesting niche for itself. first with the *Talisman* (reviewed May 1985 *IAsfm*), and now with *Warrior Knights*, the company is producing attractive, easily played games of surprising subtlety. And the components are always top-notch. In *Warrior Knights* the nobles are color-coded plastic shields, bearing the noble's heraldic emblem. The board is a delight—rich, atmospheric, and fun to play on. There are complexities in this game, make no mistake about it, but the board and the well-designed cards keep everything eminently manageable.

If you buy only one board game this year, let me suggest that you pick up this beauty. ●

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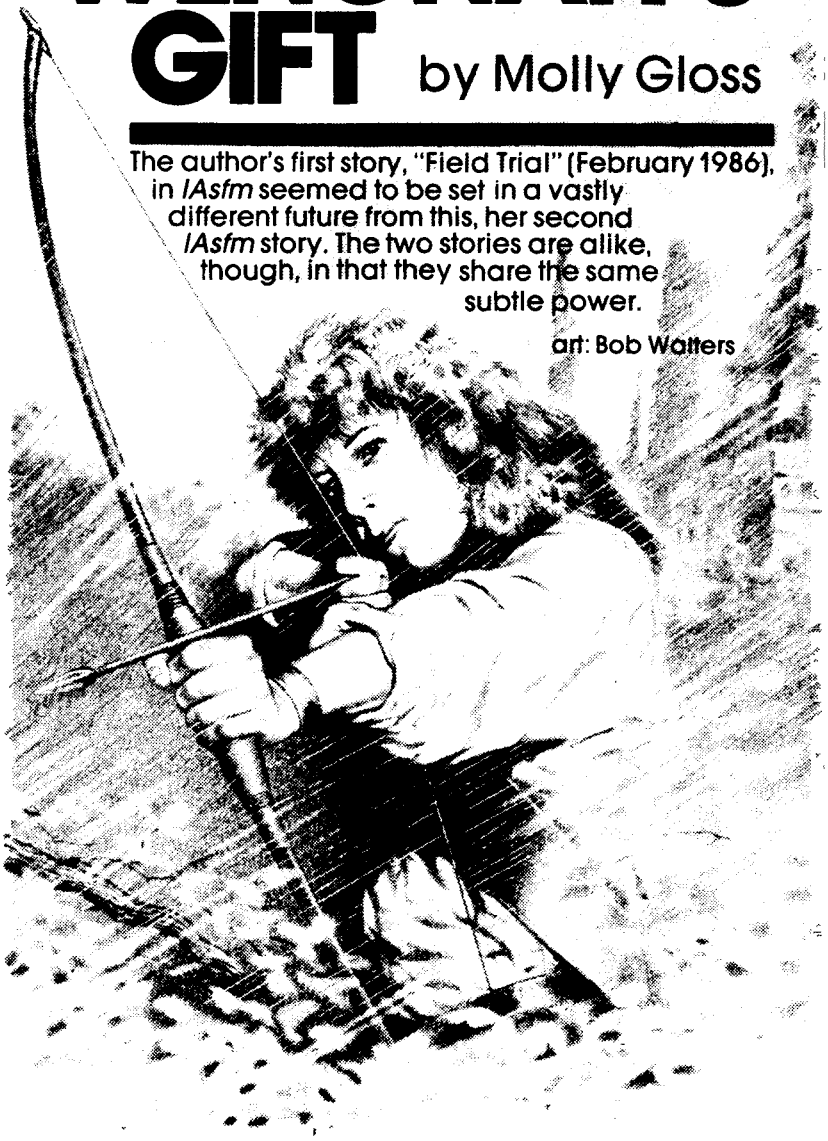
WENONAH'S GIFT

by Molly Gloss

The author's first story, "Field Trial" (February 1986), in *IAsfm* seemed to be set in a vastly different future from this, her second *IAsfm* story. The two stories are alike, though, in that they share the same subtle power.

art: Bob Walters



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In the spring of the year, in the days that are known as The Assuaging, the girl, Dulce, built her house beneath the limbs of a great cedar, climbing first, straddle-legged, to hang wind-bells in the lowest branches so when the air moved against the shards of glass the delicate unstructured music would speak to her while she worked. Two rills ran together near there, with the tree standing in the crotch between. The sound the waters made, sliding turning and rubbing against stones, and the wind stroking the glass bells and shaking the high boughs of the cedar, seemed to her to weave a complex song, a finely textured chorus, which was her reason for choosing that place where the house would stand.

She had already thrown the pottery, all the bowls, pitchers and jugs heavy and brown speckled bright berry color, before she began the laying of the foundation. She had pieced and tied a quilt, thick batted and nappy, had braided a sleeping mat from rags dyed hazelnut brown, all this before she began the building of a place where they would see use. And she had fashioned a narrow oaken trunk carved in bears and branches of spruce, made it specially for Guy, and soon as it was done traded it for one of Guy's great curving windows made specially for her, a wide arch hung with pendulous glass ropes of wisteria. She had traded to Enid a long stool with knuckled feet so she might have a sun-saver to heat her house and impel her wood-working tools. All this first. And only then, with everything in readiness, did she begin the dwelling itself, setting the stones for the foundation, laying the notched and planed floor boards, raising the squared-log walls from trees she had felled and stacked to dry two seasons earlier.

Often she did not work alone. One or another of the people would come along the path between the rills and stay to talk and to work, asking, *Shall I do it this way?* Or, *Is this the place to make the notch?* So that the work and the house remained hers, though shared.

Finally, on the last day, Wenonah came, pushing lean-legged through the pea vines that bloomed beside the water. The old woman did not put her hands to the work, only squatted on the grass in the stippled shade and from her seamed walnut face, from those deeply lidded eyes, simply watched while the girl built the house of her majority.

When Wenonah had been there a long time and Dulce's sweat had darkened her shirt at the neck, the old woman said, "I've brought a cheese," and they sat together on the thin spikey grass and ate cheese and passed a jug of very cold cider. Dulce let the soles of her feet rest on stones in the creek. She looked sideways at her house. She was a little afraid to look at Wenonah.

Finally, carefully, she said, "It is small," so the old woman might say, *No girl, no, you've built a house of good size.*

But Wenonah moved with faint impatience, pushing the palm of one

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hand through the air. "Yes. It's small." And then, puckering her mouth, shifting her buttocks against the ground, "It's a good size," and after a silence, lifting her chin as if there were argument, "This is a good place. I like the sound the water makes."

Because it was the last day before the holy days, in the afternoon several people came to work on Dulce's house. The window had not yet been set, the shingling was unfinished, the door had not been hung. So they drifted in one by one and set to work. Sometimes, if there was a small stillness, they could hear hammer blows rung from other places among the trees—Chloe's house, and Thom's, both unfinished as Dulce's, with other groups of people lending hands there too.

When the sunlight began to fail, someone came with a sodium torch and the house was finished in that false day-brightness, with Dulce, alone, straddling the roof peak to nail the last shingles. Then they extinguished the torch and stood together silently, studying the dark bulk of the house against the trees. Finally the old woman, Wenonah, made a sound that was nearly a sigh, a sound of weariness or of sadness, and patted the girl's arm.

"It has a good shape," she said.

In small knots of twos and threes, they straggled back through the scattered houses and the trees, moving gently, with the sounds of their voices and the gestures of their hands muted like the dusk. Where the woodland opened out a little, someone had made a fire in a ring of stones, a high yellow blaze, and people gathered in the glare around it, standing or squatting together, and children in bunches too, spurting round and among the adults, sending their thin shouts rising with the firesmoke.

The girl and the grandmother stood together, and while Wenonah spoke to this one or that, Dulce held her body selfconsciously straight and spoke only the few words that were necessary for courtesy. No child spoke to her, though she was often the focus of their furtive stares. There were already foods passing from hand to hand around the group, flat rounds of bread and bunches of bright red radishes and narrow-neck jugs of beer and steaming ribs of lamb, but Dulce, fasting, only handed them on.

Afterward, there was tale-telling, with first one and then another Teller standing on the hewn stump of a tree with the children sprawled closest and then the others, the adults and the three who would be confirmed as adults, sitting in a wide fan, making audience. Wenonah, who was one of the Tellers, took her turn but did not bother to push through the crowd to take the stump. She only stood where she was among the people and sent her canorous voice out over their heads, with all the faces turned up and toward her as though she were the hub of a

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wheel. She chose a tale of the ancient Civilized tribes, those people who named themselves The Mare Comes.

Dulce sat beside the old woman's sandaled feet and looked out past the shoulders and faces crowded there. In the jumping firelight she glimpsed Chloe once and later, more clearly, Thom, sitting rigid and aloof. He might have felt her watching. His eyes came round and snagged her and then lurched away.

Afterward Dulce could not remember the tale Wenonah had told—only that it was a story of pent passions and souls swollen with blood. The Civilized tales always ended in war.

There was dancing and games-playing, and the minstrels brought out their stringed instruments. Dulce stayed with Wenonah, or perhaps Wenonah with her. The old woman listened to this one and that, and sometimes laughed or spoke some light thing herself, and once she shared a pipe with two clansmen, another time gambled with sticks and lost and went off grumping and disgusted. All the while Dulce was near her, standing very stiff and silent with her eyes often turning out to the darknesses of the trees.

In time there were people sleeping on the ground, fallen where they would, and the others stepping over them carefully to go on with their gaming or to find their own path home to bed, until finally more slept than celebrated. Then the old woman plucked at Dulce's sleeve.

"I am too old to pillow my head on a stone."

In darkness and weariness and silence, the girl and the old woman climbed the ridge to Wenonah's house. It sat on a high shelf so the windows looked out on the tips of cedars and the far edge of sky, dark as metal against the serrated line of the trees. From there, they could see pillars of pale smoke rising from the valleys, marking other villages, other bonfires celebrating the Vernal Assuaging—where there were, as here, new houses, untrod thresholds, unproven young adults.

Wenonah was a maker of bows, and from the rafters of her house hung sheafs of wild-cherry arrowwoods and half-shaped bows of yew and ash, and raw limbs drying, rubbed shiny with grease. The floor was littered with wood shavings and peeled bark, the dark stains of spilled fat, fragments of feathers and twisted fiber bowstring. Wenonah cleared a space on the floor and unrolled a mat there and she and Dulce lay down together beneath her thin old confirmation quilt. They did not touch.

After a while Wenonah said, "You must wait." She lay on her hip and spoke the words into the darkness. "Find a place and then wait. The others will be anxious, will run to the hunt, and one will come to where you are."

Dulce lay on her back and looked at the long, straight shapes of the unfinished bows. She hugged her own shoulders under the quilt.

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For a long time she listened to the old woman sleeping and, later, the rain dribbling against the roof. Then she went out and stood at the edge of the bluff with the hood of her shirt thrown back so the rain purled in her hair, and she waited until the thin rim of sun made a wound against the horizon. Behind her, there was a sound of a bare foot on the grass and when she turned it was Wenonah, holding a long bow and sheaf of arrows with both her hands stretched out flat and wide so the things lay across her palms like a formal offering. The bow was very pale, a smooth double curve with the short straightness of the grip between, and the ends curving back again equally, and the bow string taut and dark. The tips of the arrows were obsidian.

The old woman sucked in the edges of her mouth. There were fine, clear beads of rain in her eyelashes. She thrust the gift toward Dulce, pushing it hard into her hands. They did not speak. The girl made a small sound and the old woman looked away, frowning, ducking her chin. But they did not speak. And the only touch between them was the dry rasp of the old woman's hands against the girl's wrists as she gave over the bow and the arrows.

The priest, Daivid, sat hunched on the crosspaths stone with the hood of his cloak pulled high against the rain. Perhaps he had drunk too much beer or gambled too long: his eyes were faintly swollen, his mouth a thin line. Dulce squatted a little way from him. Chloe was there too, sitting on the wet grass with her knees drawn up under her shirt and her arms lapping round her shins. In the thin daylight she seemed gray faced. Her eyes touched Dulce and slid aside. The three waited and in a moment the other priests came—the tall woman named Hannah and the old man, Steev. They waited together, all of them, in silence, until at last Thom came, holding a red-lacquered longbow in the tight fist of his hand. He did not quite look in Chloe's face, and not at all toward Dulce. Perhaps it was their old, child's friendship that kept his eyes hard and narrow and turned from her. Then the priest, Daivid, stood with a little grunting sound and led them all through the rain, away from the houses.

The sky paled a little, hanging ragged in the points of the trees, but there was no hardening into daylight, just a woolly and timeless grayness so that Dulce did not know how far or how long they walked. Often she smelled the salt water of the Sound, but the way was known only to the priests and they did not speak. Dulce's new bow and sheaf rubbed a line where she carried them slung across a shoulder. The hem of her long shirt drew wetness up like a wick so it slapped stinging cold and gritty against her calves.

When the sky began to darken with twilight, they came finally to a ruin of Civilization, some ancient wreckage of their many wars. Among the trees there were long hillocks of bricks and broken sheets of paving

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hard under the moss. And there had been a gate: part of a stone arch rose into the limbs of the cedars. Daivid stood beneath it and threw back his cowl, and then Dulce saw the others who were gathered already at that place, faces she did not know, or knew a little, priests and youths of other villages. They made no sound, they only crouched or stood or lay silently, separately, under the shadows of the trees and among the fine twigs of huckleberry bush and salal. Above their heads there were enigmatic symbols gouged in the granite, U AV L RESE.

In the darkness under the high stone arch, Dulce found a place for herself and squatted down, bunching her body against the cold. And then she simply waited for day. She could feel others near her, crouching silent too, waiting too. Only the priests slept. She could hear, sometimes, the sounds of their dreams.

Others came in the night—one thin boy and several girls, following their priests through the darkness. None of them spoke. They found places under the arch and made their own bodies small against the cold. Afterward, in the stillness, Dulce heard someone make a faint sound, a sigh.

Through high gaps in the trees, the sky seemed not to lighten but simply to clarify so that everything became easier to see, but without brightness. Finally the old priest whose name was Steev came quietly and bent to touch Dulce's wrist. She followed him into the timber of the Proving Ground. Others had also begun to scatter. She saw Thom, following Hannah away, turning to cast Dulce a quick white look.

Steev led her through the darkness under the wet trees, a long walk to a small cave along a bluff with a view of the Sound. It was an old cave, Civilized, with concrete walls and unglassed windows, small and high looking out over the gray water. They did not go into the cave's mouth.

In toneless weariness, standing beside the dark opening, Steev said, "Wait at this place for the call to start. And afterward, when you have been confirmed, you may go out through the gate where we were." He was an old man and perhaps he had attended too many confirmations. He did not quite look into Dulce's face.

She stood out of her shirt, stood naked with her hair cold and lank against her neck, and handed the shirt to the priest. She held Wenonah's bow fisted in one hand, the sheaf of arrows across her shoulder, a thin-bladed knife strapped to her calf with a string. She stood watching the priest go back along the path toward the gate, and then she crouched with her hips against the cool flat wall of the cave and she waited. She could see her heartbeat in her breast.

At dawn, above the gray mist rose a clear, distant bell-note from a horn. Irresistibly, she ran. The haft of the knife struck hard little blows

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against her ankle bone, the sheaf of arrows beat against her spine. She ran until the breath and the first spurt of fear were gone out of her. Then from a high ridge she rested the heels of her hands on her knees and sucked the frigid air, panting. From this height she could see behind, the gray finger of the Sound, and ahead between distant hillocks, several priests standing in the drizzle under the arch of the gate. They had drawn their arms inside their cloaks and pulled their hoods high. Through the gauze of rain, standing utterly still, they seemed faceless, bodyless, like the stone phallics that stood in small groves in some of the old ruined villages of the Civilized tribes. And seeing them, Dulce remembered the old woman's counsel.

When she had chosen a place, she crouched among the leaves and held the bow across the tops of her bent legs and simply waited. Her chest was very tight, so she took air in through her mouth. The rain beaded on the backs of her hands, her shoulders, the crown of her head. She waited a long time, squatting silently, with her naked buttocks resting against her naked heels and the foliage dripping and the wind running cold against her back, tangling the loose strands of her hair.

Finally, in twilight the color of pewter, between the long straps of the leaves there was a transient paleness, a shape sliding. She closed her mouth, lips tightening stiffly over teeth, and waited. In a moment it came toward her through the high leaves, moving soundless on fine, long-boned legs. She waited, crouching still, with the bow in her hands nocked, waiting too, and the straight shaft of the arrow pointing away from her breast. There was only a little shaking and it did not reach her hands.

She waited until she could see the smooth glide of muscle beneath the dark skin, until even the sharp body smell was in her nostrils, and then she made only one fluid motion rearing above the leaves with the bow lifting in her hands and the bowstring drawn taut and then freed, all of it a single wholeness, complete and seamless, with only the face startling toward her, the widened eyes, seeming separate and disconnected.

She stood afterward with the bow still poised and her heart beating behind her eyes, stood very still, staring, watching the rain puddle in the folds of the body. Then a little sound came out of her on a little breath, and she let the bow down and squatted where she was in the wet fronds, hugging hands to elbows, rocking back and forth on her hips, until she had done with shaking.

It began to be dark. In a while she dipped her thumbs in the small stream of blood and marked her face and her breast with pairs of bright stripes, but in the darkness there would be no seeing the red tokens of her confirmation. So she waited for daylight, sitting alone and still. Her hair was heavy and wet and the wind brought it into her face. After a

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long time, she groped in the stems of grass beside the body until her hand closed on the lacquered red bow. Under her fingertips, in the darkness, its touch was cold and hard as bone—the rib of a giant. She freed the bowstring with the edge of her knife, so she might tie back her hair with its stiff strand.

When there was a little light she took the body across her shoulders and went away cautiously toward the gate of the Proving Ground. She held Thom's red bow in one fist, her own bow resting in a pale double curve, low against her back.

Later, in all the valleys, there were heavy palls of smoke, and ashes dusting the trees, and where a house became a funeral pyre there would be black cinders for a while and then, in the sweetened soil, small blooms and tall, thin trees growing. ●

NEXT ISSUE:

Lucius Shepard returns to *IAsfm* next month with our August cover story, "Aymara." Shepard's last piece for us, "R & R," in our April issue, has already become one of the year's most talked-about stories, and "Aymara"—a complex and riveting tale of time-travel, passion, revenge, terrorism, and transcendence, set against the jungles of revolution-torn Central America—is sure to stir up similar amounts of excitement. Our August Viewpoint examines the work of Shepard and the other hot new writers of the 1980s; it's called "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns," written by Michael Swanwick (himself one of the hottest of those new writers), and if you want to keep up with what's happening on the cutting edge of science fiction today, don't miss this unique look—complete with photographs—at those new young writers of the '80s who are someday going to be the Big Name Writers of the '90s.

Also in August: Orson Scott Card returns with "Hatrack River," a brilliantly-evocative story of life and death and dark forces in the early days of the American frontier, when places like Pennsylvania and Ohio were deep, forbidding wildernesses, and dark magic was afoot; from 1805 Ohio, Harry Turtledove then takes us even further back (and a little bit sideways) in time, to an alternate Byzantine Empire that might-have-been, for "Strange Eruptions," the latest—and most chilling—in his popular series of stories about the exploits of Basil Argyros, which formerly ran in another magazine (we also have another new Argyros story in inventory); Karen Joy Fowler gives us a bittersweet and spooky look at a young girl's first encounter with "The Dragon's Head"; and, in "Stop-Motion," Tim Sullivan shows us some very Special Effects indeed. Plus our usual columns and features. Look for the August issue on your newsstands on July 1, 1986.

COMING UP: big new stories by Connie Willis, George R.R. Martin, Kim Stanley Robinson, Frederik Pohl, Nancy Kress, Lucius Shepard, Avram Davidson, Ian Watson, Jack McDevitt, John M. Ford, Harry Turtledove, Susan Palwick, Gwyneth Jones, and many others.

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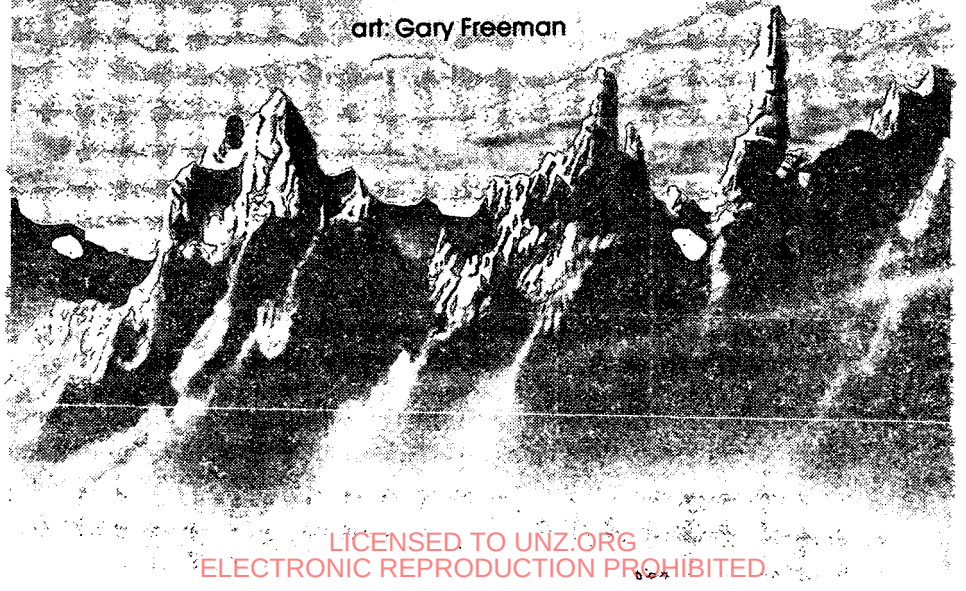
by Robert Silverberg

GILGAMESH IN THE OUTBACK

"Sailing to Byzantium," Robert Silverberg's last story in *IAsfm*, is currently a finalist for the 1985 Nebula award for best Novella. A collection of his shorter pieces, *Beyond the Safe Zone*, was published by Donald I. Fine in April, and a novel, *Star for Gypsies*, will be out from them this fall. As always, we are honored to showcase Mr. Silverberg's latest work.

art: Gary Freeman



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Faust. First I will question thee about hell.
Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?
Meph. Under the heavens.
Faust. Ay, but whereabouts?
Meph. Within the bowels of these elements,
Where we are tortur'd and remain for ever:
Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd
In one self place; for where we are is hell,
And where hell is, there must we ever be:
And, to conclude, when all the world dissolves,
And every creature shall be purified,
All places shall be hell that are not heaven.
Faust. Come, I think hell's a fable.
Meph. Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind.

Marlowe: *Dr. Faustus*

Jagged green lightning danced on the horizon and the wind came ripping like a blade out of the east, skinning the flat land bare and sending up clouds of gray-brown dust. Gilgamesh grinned broadly. By Enlil, now that was a wind! A lion-killing wind it was, a wind that turned the air dry and crackling. The beasts of the field gave you the greatest joy in their hunting when the wind was like that, hard and sharp and cruel.

He narrowed his eyes and stared into the distance, searching for this day's prey. His bow of several fine woods, the bow that no man but he was strong enough to draw—no man but he and Enkidu his beloved thrice-lost friend—hung loosely from his hand. His body was poised and ready. Come now, you beasts! Come and be slain! It is Gilgamesh king of Uruk who would make his sport with you this day!

Other men in this land, when they went about their hunting, made use of guns, those foul machines that the New Dead had brought, which hurled death from a great distance along with much noise and fire and smoke; or they employed the even deadlier laser devices from whose ugly snouts came spurts of blue-white flame. Cowardly things, all those killing-machines! Gilgamesh loathed them, as he did most instruments of the New Dead, those slick and bustling Johnny-come-latelies of Hell. He would not touch them if he could help it. In all the thousands of years he had dwelled in this nether world he had never used any weapons but those he had known during his first lifetime: the javelin, the spear, the double-headed axe, the hunting-bow, the good bronze sword. It took some skill, hunting with such weapons as those. And there was physical effort; there was more than a little risk. Hunting was a contest, was it not? Then it must make demands. Why, if the idea was merely to slaughter

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one's prey in the fastest and easiest and safest way, then the sensible thing to do would be to ride high above the hunting-grounds in a weapons-platform and drop a little nuke, eh, and lay waste five kingdoms' worth of beasts at a single stroke!

He knew that there were those who thought him a fool for such ideas. Caesar, for one. Cocksure coldblooded Julius with the gleaming pistols thrust into his belt and the submachine gun slung across his shoulders. "Why don't you admit it?" Caesar had asked him once, riding up in his jeep as Gilgamesh was making ready to set forth toward Hell's open wilderness. "It's a pure affectation, Gilgamesh, all this insistence on arrows and javelins and spears. This isn't old Sumer you're living in now."

Gilgamesh spat. "Hunt with 9-millimeter automatics? Hunt with grenades and cluster bombs and lasers? You call that sport, Caesar?"

"I call it acceptance of reality. Is it technology you hate? What's the difference between using a bow and arrow and using a gun? They're both technology, Gilgamesh. It isn't as though you kill the animals with your bare hands."

"I have done that too," said Gilgamesh.

"Bah! I'm on to your game. Big hulking Gilgamesh; the simple innocent oversized Bronze Age hero! That's just an affectation too, my friend! You pretend to be a stupid stubborn thick-skulled barbarian because it suits you to be left alone to your hunting and your wandering, and that's all you claim that you really want. But secretly you regard yourself as superior to anybody who lived in an era softer than your own. You mean to restore the bad old filthy ways of the ancient ancients, isn't that so? If I read you the right way you're just biding your time, skulking around with your bow and arrow in the dreary Outback until you think it's the right moment to launch the *putsch* that carries you to supreme power here. Isn't that it, Gilgamesh? You've got some crazy fantasy of overthrowing Satan himself and lording it over all of us. And then we'll live in mud cities again and make little chicken-scratches on clay tablets, the way we were meant to do. What do you say?"

"I say this is great nonsense, Caesar."

"Is it? This place is full of kings and emperors and sultans and pharaohs and shahs and presidents and dictators, and every single one of them wants to be Number One again. My guess is that you're no exception."

"In this you are very wrong."

"I doubt that. I suspect you believe you're the best of us all: you, the sturdy warrior, the great hunter, the maker of bricks, the builder of vast temples and lofty walls, the shining beacon of ancient heroism. You think we're all decadent rascally degenerates and that you're the one true

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virtuous man. But you're as proud and ambitious as any of us. Isn't that how it is? You're a fraud, Gilgamesh, a huge musclebound fraud!"

"At least I am no slippery tricky serpent like you, Caesar, who dons a wig and spies on women at their mysteries if it pleases him."

Caesar looked untroubled by the thrust. "And so you pass three quarters of your time killing stupid monstrous creatures in the Outback and you make sure everyone knows that you're too pious to have anything to do with modern weapons while you do it. You don't fool me. It isn't virtue that keeps you from doing your killing with a decent double-barreled .470 Rigby. It's intellectual pride, or maybe simple laziness. The bow just happens to be the weapon you grew up with, who knows how many thousands of years ago. You like it because it's familiar. But what language are you speaking now, eh? Is it your thick-tongued Euphrates gibberish? No, it seems to be English, doesn't it? Did you grow up speaking English too, Gilgamesh? Did you grow up riding around in jeeps and choppers? Apparently *some* of the new ways are acceptable to you."

Gilgamesh shrugged. "I speak English with you because that is what is spoken now in this place. In my heart I speak the old tongue, Caesar. In my heart I am still Gilgamesh of Uruk, and I will hunt as I hunt."

"Uruk's long gone to dust. This is the life after life, my friend. We've been here a long time. We'll be here for all time to come, unless I miss my guess. New people constantly bring new ideas to this place, and it's impossible to ignore them. Even you can't do it. Isn't that a wristwatch I see on your arm, Gilgamesh? A *digital* watch, no less?"

"I will hunt as I hunt," said Gilgamesh. "There is no sport in it, when you do it with guns. There is no grace in it."

Caesar shook his head. "I never could understand hunting for sport, anyway. Killing a few stags, yes, or a boar or two, when you're bivouacked in some dismal Gaulish forest and your men want meat. But hunting? Slaughtering hideous animals that aren't even edible? By Apollo, it's all nonsense to me!"

"My point exactly."

"But if you must hunt, to scorn the use of a decent hunting rifle—"

"You will never convince me."

"No," Caesar said with a sigh. "I suppose I won't. I should know better than to argue with a reactionary."

"Reactionary! In my time I was thought to be a radical," said Gilgamesh. "When I was king in Uruk—"

"Just so," Caesar said, laughing. "King in Uruk. Was there ever a king who wasn't reactionary? You put a crown on your head and it addles your brains instantly. Three times Antonius offered me a crown, Gilgamesh, three times, and—"

"—you did thrice refuse it, yes. I know all that. 'Was this ambition?'

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You thought you'd have the power without the emblem. Who were you fooling, Caesar? Not Brutus, so I hear. Brutus said you were ambitious. And Brutus—"

That stung him. "Damn you, don't say it!"

"—was an honorable man," Gilgamesh concluded, enjoying Caesar's discomfiture.

Caesar groaned. "If I hear that line once more—"

"Some say this is a place of torment," said Gilgamesh serenely. "If in truth it is, yours is to be swallowed up in another man's poetry. Leave me to my bows and arrows, Caesar, and return to your jeep and your trivial intrigues. I am a fool and a reactionary, yes. But you know nothing of hunting. Nor do you understand anything of me."

All that had been a year ago, or two, or maybe five—with or without a wristwatch, there was no keeping proper track of time in Hell, where the unmoving ruddy eye of Paradise never budged from the sky—and now Gilgamesh was far from Caesar and all his minions, far from the troublesome center of Hell and the tiresome squabbling of those like Caesar and Alexander and Napoleon and that sordid little Guevara man who maneuvered for power in this place.

Let them maneuver all they liked, those shoddy new men of the latter days. Some day they might learn wisdom, and was not that the purpose of this place, if it had any purpose at all?

Gilgamesh preferred to withdraw. Unlike the rest of those fallen emperors and kings and pharaohs and shahs, he felt no yearning to reshape Hell in his own image. Caesar was as wrong about Gilgamesh's ambitions as he was about the reasons for his preferences in hunting gear. Out here in the Outback, in the bleak dry chilly hinterlands of Hell, Gilgamesh hoped to find peace. That was all he wanted now: peace. He had wanted much more, once, but that had been long ago.

There was a stirring in the scraggly underbrush.

A lion, maybe?

No, Gilgamesh thought. There were no lions to be found in Hell, only the strange nether-world beasts. Ugly hairy things with flat noses and many legs and dull baleful eyes, and slick shiny things with the faces of women and the bodies of malformed dogs, and worse, much worse. Some had drooping leathery wings and some were armed with spiked tails that rose like a scorpion's and some had mouths that opened wide enough to swallow an elephant at a gulp. They all were demons of one sort or another, Gilgamesh knew. No matter. Hunting was hunting; the prey was the prey; all beasts were one in the contest of the field. That fop Caesar could never begin to comprehend that.

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Drawing an arrow from his quiver, Gilgamesh laid it lightly across his bow and waited.

"If you ever had come to Texas, H.P., this here's a lot like what you'd have seen," said the big barrel-chested man with the powerful arms and the deeply tanned skin. Gesturing sweepingly with one hand, he held the wheel of the Land Rover lightly with three fingers of the other, casually guiding the vehicle in jouncing zigs and zags over the flat trackless landscape. Gnarled gray-green shrubs matted the gritty ground. The sky was black with swirling dust. Far off in the distance barren mountains rose like dark jagged teeth. "Beautiful. Beautiful. As close to Texas in look as makes no never mind, this countryside is."

"Beautiful?" said the other man uncertainly. "Hell?"

"This stretch sure is. But if you think Hell's beautiful, you should have seen Texas!"

The burly man laughed and gunned the engine and the Land Rover went leaping and bouncing onward at a stupefying speed.

His traveling companion, a gaunt lantern-jawed man as pale as the other was bronzed, sat very still in the passenger seat, knees together and elbows digging in against his ribs, as if he expected a fiery crash at any moment. The two of them had been journeying across the interminable parched wastes of the Outback for many days now—how many, not even the Elder Gods could tell. They were ambassadors, these two: Their Excellencies Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft of the Kingdom of New Holy Diabolic England, envoys of His Britannic Majesty Henry VIII to the court of Prester John.

In another life they had been writers, fantasists, inventors of fables; but now they found themselves caught up in something far more fantastic than anything to be found in any of their tales, for this was no fable, this was no fantasy. This was the reality of Hell.

"Robert—" said the pale man nervously.

"A lot like Texas, yes," Howard went on, "only Hell's just a faint carbon copy of the genuine item. Just a rough first draft, is all. You see that sandstorm rising out thataway? *We* had sandstorms, they covered entire counties! You see that lightning? In Texas that would be just a flicker!"

"If you could drive just a little more slowly, Bob—"

"More slowly? Chthulu's whiskers, man, I *am* driving slowly!"

"Yes, I'm quite sure you believe that you are."

"And the way I always heard it, H.P., you loved for people to drive you around at top speed. Seventy, eighty miles an hour, that was what you liked best, so the story goes."

"In the other life one dies only once, and then all pain ceases," Lovecraft replied. "But here, where one can go to the Undertaker again and again,

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and when one returns one remembers every final agony in the brightest of hues—here, dear friend Bob, death's much more to be feared, for the pain of it stays with one forever, and one may die a thousand deaths." Lovecraft managed a pale baleful smile. "Speak of that to some professional warrior, Bob, some Trojan or Hun or Assyrian—or one of the gladiators, maybe, someone who has died and died and died again. Ask him about it: the dying and the rebirth, and the pain, the hideous torment, reliving every detail. It is a dreadful thing to die in Hell. I fear dying here far more than I ever did in life. I will take no needless risks here."

Howard snorted. "Gawd, try and figure you out! When you thought you lived only once, you made people go roaring along with you on the highway a mile a minute. Here where no one stays dead for very long you want me to drive like an old woman. Well, I'll attempt it, H.P., but everything in me cries out to go like the wind. When you live in big country, you learn to cover the territory the way it has to be covered. And Texas is the biggest country there is. It isn't just a place, it's a state of mind."

"As is Hell," said Lovecraft. "Though I grant you that Hell isn't Texas."

"Texas!" Howard boomed. "God damn, I wish you could have seen it! By God, H.P., what a time we'd have had, you and me, if you'd come to Texas. Two gentlemen of letters like us riding together all to hell and gone from Corpus Christi to El Paso and back again, seeing it all and telling each other wondrous stories all the way! I swear, it would have enlarged your soul, H.P. Beauty such as perhaps even you couldn't have imagined. That big sky. That blazing sun. And the open space! Whole empires could fit into Texas and never be seen again! That Rhode Island of yours, H.P.—we could drop it down just back of Cross Plains and lose it behind a medium-size prickly pear! What you see here, it just gives you the merest idea of that glorious beauty. Though I admit this is plenty beautiful itself, this here."

"I wish I could share your joy in this landscape, Robert," Lovecraft said quietly, when it seemed that Howard had said all he meant to say.

"You don't care for it?" Howard asked, sounding surprised and a little wounded.

"I can say one good thing for it: at least it's far from the sea."

"You'll give it that much, will you?"

"You know how I hate the sea and all that the sea contains! Its odious creatures—that hideous reek of salt air hovering above it—" Lovecraft shuddered fastidiously. "But this land—this bitter desert—you don't find it somber? You don't find it forbidding?"

"It's the most beautiful place I've seen since I came to Hell."

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"Perhaps the beauty is too subtle for my eye. Perhaps it escapes me altogether. I was always a man for cities, myself."

"What you're trying to say, I reckon, is that all this looks real hateful to you. Is that it? As grim and ghastly as the Plateau of Leng, eh, H.P.?" Howard laughed. " 'Sterile hills of gray granite . . . dim wastes of rock and ice and snow . . . ' " Hearing himself quoted, Lovecraft laughed too, though not exuberantly. Howard went on, "I look around at the Outback of Hell and I see something a whole lot like Texas, and I love it. For you it's as sinister as dark frosty Leng, where people have horns and hooves and munch on corpses and sing hymns to Nyarlathotep. Oh, H.P., H.P., there's no accounting for tastes, is there? Why, there's even some people who—whoa, now! Look there!"

He braked the Land Rover suddenly and brought it to a jolting halt. A small malevolent-looking something with blazing eyes and a scaly body had broken from cover and gone scuttering across the path just in front of them. Now it faced them, glaring up out of the road, snarling and hissing flame.

"Hell-cat!" Howard cried. "Hell-coyote! *Look* at that critter, H.P. You ever see so much ugliness packed into such a small package? Scare the toenails off a shoggoth, that one would!"

"Can you drive past it?" Lovecraft asked, looking dismayed.

"I want a closer look, first." Howard rummaged down by his boots and pulled a pistol from the clutter on the floor of the car. "Don't it give you the shivers, driving around in a land full of critters that could have come right out of one of your stories, or mine? I want to look this little ghoul-cat right in the eye."

"Robert—"

"You wait here. I'll only be but a minute."

Howard swung himself down from the Land Rover and marched stolidly toward the hissing little beast, which stood its ground. Lovecraft watched fretfully. At any moment the creature might leap upon Bob Howard and rip out his throat with a swipe of its horrid yellow talons, perhaps—or burrow snout-deep into his chest, seeking the Texan's warm, throbbing heart—

They stood staring at each other, Howard and the small monster, no more than a dozen feet apart. For a long moment neither one moved. Howard, gun in hand, leaned forward to inspect the beast as one might look at a feral cat guarding the mouth of an alleyway. Did he mean to shoot it? No, Lovecraft thought: beneath his bluster the robust Howard seemed surprisingly squeamish about bloodshed and violence of any sort.

Then things began happening very quickly. Out of a thicket to the left a much larger animal abruptly emerged: a ravening Hell-creature with a crocodile head and powerful thick-thighed legs that ended in monstrous

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curving claws. An arrow ran through the quivering dewlaps of its heavy throat from side to side, and a hideous dark ichor streamed from the wound down the beast's repellent blue-gray fur. The small animal, seeing the larger one wounded this way, instantly sprang upon its back and sank its fangs joyously into its shoulder. But a moment later there burst from the same thicket a man of astonishing size, a great dark-haired black-bearded man clad only in a bit of cloth about his waist. Plainly he was the huntsman who had wounded the larger monster, for there was a bow of awesome dimensions in his hand and a quiver of arrows on his back. In utter fearlessness the giant plucked the foul little creature from the wounded beast's back and hurled it far out of sight; then, swinging around, he drew a gleaming bronze dagger and with a single fierce thrust drove it into the beast of his prey as the *coup de grace* that brought the animal crashing heavily down.

All this took only an instant. Lovecraft, peering through the window of the Land Rover, was dazzled by the strength and speed of the dispatch and awed by the size and agility of the half-naked huntsman. He glanced toward Howard, who stood to one side, his own considerable frame utterly dwarfed by the black-bearded man.

For a moment Howard seemed dumbstruck, paralyzed with wonder and amazement. But then he was the first to speak.

"By Crom," he muttered, staring at the giant. "Surely this is Conan of Aquilonia and none other!" He was trembling. He took a lurching step toward the huge man, holding out both his hands in a strange gesture—submission, was it? "Lord Conan?" Howard murmured. "Great king, is it you? Conan? Conan?" And before Lovecraft's astounded eyes Howard fell to his knees next to the dying beast, and looked up with awe and something like rapture in his eyes at the towering huntsman.

It had been a decent day's hunting so far. Three beasts brought down after long and satisfying chase; every shaft fairly placed; each animal skillfully dressed, the meat set out as bait for other hell-beasts, the hide and head carefully put aside for proper cleaning at nightfall. There was true pleasure in work done so well.

Yet there was a hollowness at the heart of it all, Gilgamesh thought, that left him leaden and cheerless no matter how cleanly his arrows sped to their mark. He never felt that true fulfillment, that clean sense of completion, that joy of accomplishment, which was ultimately the only thing he sought.

Why was that? Was it because—as the Christian dead so drearily insisted—because this was Hell, where by definition there could be no delight?

To Gilgamesh that was foolishness. Those who came here expecting

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eternal punishment did indeed get eternal punishment, and it was even more horrendous than anything they had anticipated. It served them right, those true believers, those gullible New Dead, that army of credulous Christians.

He had been amazed when their kind first came flocking into Hell, Enki only knew how many thousands of years ago. The things they talked of! Rivers of boiling oil! Lakes of pitch! Demons with pitchforks! That was what they expected, and the Administration was happy to oblige them. There were Torture Towns aplenty for those who wanted them. Gilgamesh had trouble understanding why anyone would. Nobody among the Old Dead really could figure them out, those absurd New Dead with their obsession with punishment. What was it Sargon called them? Masochists, that was the word. Pathetic masochists. But then that sly little Machiavelli had begged to disagree, saying, "No, my lord, it would be a violation of the nature of Hell to send a true masochist off to the torments. The only ones who go are the strong ones, the bullies, the braggarts, the ones who are cowards at the core of their souls." Augustus had had something to say on the matter too, and Caesar, and that Egyptian bitch Hatshepsut had butted in, she of the false beard and the startling eyes, and then all of them had jabbered at once, trying yet again to make sense of the Christian New Dead. Until finally Gilgamesh had said, before stalking out of the room, "The trouble with all of you is that you keep trying to make sense out of this place. But when you've been here as long as I have—"

He had to admit that the reality of Hell had turned out to be nothing at all like what the priests had promised it would be. The House of Dust and Darkness, was what they had called it in Uruk long ago. A place where the dead lived in eternal night and sadness, clad like birds, with wings for garments. Where the dwellers had dust for their bread, and clay for their meat. Where the kings of the earth, the masters, the high rulers, lived humbly without their crowns, and were forced to wait on the demons like servants. Small wonder that he had dreaded death as he had, believing that that was what awaited him for all time to come!

Well, in fact all that had been mere myth and folly. Gilgamesh could still remember Hell as it had been when he first had come to it: a place much like Uruk, so it seemed, with low flat-roofed buildings of whitewashed brick, and temples rising on high platforms of many steps. And there he found all the heroes of olden days, living as they had always lived: Lugalbanda his father, and Enmerkar his father's father, and Ziusudra who built the vessel by which mankind survived the Flood, and others on and on back to the dawn of time. At least that was what it was like where Gilgamesh first found himself; there were other districts, he discovered later, that were quite different, places where people lived in

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caves, or in pits in the ground, or in flimsy houses of reeds, and still other places where the Hairy Men dwelled and had no houses at all. Most of that was gone now, greatly transformed by all those who had come to Hell in the latter days, and indeed a lot of nonsensical ugliness and ideological foolishness had entered in recent centuries in the baggage of the New Dead. But still, the idea that this whole vast realm—infinitely bigger than his own beloved Land of the Two Rivers—existed merely for the sake of chastising the dead for their sins struck Gilgamesh as too silly for serious contemplation.

Why, then, was the joy of his hunting so pale and hollow? Why none of the old ecstasy when spying the prey, when drawing the great bow, when sending the arrow true to its mark?

Gilgamesh thought he knew why, and it had nothing to do with punishment. There had been joy aplenty in the hunting for many a thousand years of his life in Hell. If the joy had gone from it now, it was only that in these latter days he hunted alone; that Enkidu, his friend, his true brother, his other self, was not with him. That and nothing but that: for he had never felt complete without Enkidu since they first had met and wrestled and come to love one another after the manner of brothers, long ago in the city of Uruk. That great burly man, broad and tall and strong as Gilgamesh himself, that shaggy wild creature out of the high ridges: Gilgamesh had never loved anyone as he loved Enkidu.

But it was the fate of Gilgamesh, so it seemed, to lose him again and again. Enkidu had been ripped from him the first time long ago when they still dwelled in Uruk, on that dark day when the gods had had revenge upon them for their great pride and had sent the fever to take Enkidu's life. In time Gilgamesh too had yielded to death and was taken into Hell, which he found nothing at all like the Hell that the scribes and priests of the Land had taught; and there he had searched for Enkidu and one glorious day he had found him. Hell had been a much smaller place, then, and everyone seemed to know everyone else; but even so it had taken an age to track him down. Oh, the rejoicing that day in Hell! Oh, the singing and the dancing, the vast festival that went on and on! There was great kindliness among the denizens of Hell in those days, and everyone was glad for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Minos of Crete gave the first great party in honor of their reunion and then it was Amenhotep's turn, and then Agamemnon's, and on the fourth day the host was dark slender Varuna, the Meluhhan king, and then on the fifth the heroes gathered in the ancient hall of the Ice-Hunter folk where one-eyed Vy-otin was chieftain and the floor was strewn with mammoth tusks, and after that—

Well, and it went on for some long time, the great celebration of the reunion. This was long before the hordes of New Dead had come, all those

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grubby little unheroic people out of unheroic times, carrying with them their nasty little demons and their dark twisted apparatus of damnation and punishment. Before they had come, Hell had simply been a place to live in the time after life. It was all very different then, a far happier place.

For uncountable years Gilgamesh and Enkidu dwelled together in Gilgamesh's palace in Hell as they had in the old days in the Land of the Two Rivers. And all was well with them, with much hunting and feasting, and they were happy in Hell even after the New Dead began to come in, bringing all their terrible changes.

They were shoddy folk, these New Dead, confused of soul and flimsy of intellect, and their petty trifling rivalries and vain strutting poses were a great nuisance. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu kept their distance from them while they replayed all the follies of their lives, their nonsensical Crusades and their idiotic trade wars and their preposterous theological squabbles. The trouble was that they had brought not only their lunatic ideas to Hell but also their accursed diabolical modern gadgets, and the worst of those were the vile weapons called guns, that slaughtered noisily from afar in the most shameful cowardly way. Heroes know how to parry the blow of a battle-axe or the thrust of a sword; but what can even a hero do about a bullet from afar? It was Enkidu's bad luck to fall between two quarreling bands of these gun-wielders, a flock of babbling Spaniards and a rabble of arrogant Englanders, for whom he tried to make peace. Of course they would have no peace, and soon shots were flying, and Gilgamesh arrived at the scene just as a bolt from an arquebus tore through his dear Enkidu's noble heart.

No one dies in Hell forever; but some are dead a long time, and that was how it was with Enkidu. It pleased the Undertaker this time to keep him in limbo some hundreds of years, or however many it was—tallying such matters in Hell is always difficult. It was, at any rate, a dreadful long while, and Gilgamesh once more felt that terrible inrush of loneliness that only the presence of Enkidu might cure. Hell continued to change, and now the changes were coming at a stupefying, overwhelming rate. There seemed to be far more people in the world than there ever had been in the old days, and great armies of them marched into Hell every day, a swarming rabble of uncouth strangers who after only a little interval of disorientation and bewilderment would swiftly set out to reshape the whole place into something as discordant and repellent as the world they had left behind. The steam-engine came, with its clamor and clangor, and something called the dynamo, and then harsh glittering electrical lights blazed in every street where the lamps had been and factories arose and began pouring out all manner of strange things. And more and more and more, relentlessly, unceasingly. Railroads. Tele-

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phones. Automobiles. Noise, smoke, soot everywhere, and no way to hide from it. The Industrial Revolution, they called it. Satan and his swarm of Administration bureaucrats seemed to love all the new things, and so did almost everyone else, except for Gilgamesh and a few other cranky conservatives. "What are they trying to do?" Rabelais asked one day. "Turn the place into Hell?" Now the New Dead were bringing in such devices as radios and helicopters and computers, and everyone was speaking English, so that once again Gilgamesh, who had grudgingly learned the newfangled Greek long ago when Agamemnon and his crew had insisted on it, was forced to master yet another tongue-twisting intricate language. It was a dreary time for him. And then at last did Enkidu reappear, far away in one of the cold northern domains; and he made his way south and for a time they were reunited a second time, and once more all was well for Gilgamesh of Uruk in Hell.

But now they were separated again, this time by something colder and more cruel than death itself. It was beyond all belief, but they had quarreled. There had been words between them, ugly words on both sides, such a dispute as never in thousands of years had passed between them in the land of the living or in the land of Hell, and at last Enkidu had said that which Gilgamesh had never dreamed he would ever hear, which was, "I want no more of you, king of Uruk. If you cross my path again I will have your life." Could that have been Enkidu speaking, or was it, Gilgamesh wondered, some demon of Hell in Enkidu's form?

In any case he was gone. He vanished into the turmoil and intricacy of Hell and placed himself beyond Gilgamesh's finding; and when Gilgamesh sent forth inquiries, back came only the report, "He will not speak with you. He has no love for you, Gilgamesh."

It could not be. It must be a spell of witchcraft, thought Gilgamesh. Surely this was some dark working of the Hell of the New Dead, that could turn brother against brother and lead Enkidu to persist in his wrath. In time, Gilgamesh was sure, Enkidu would be triumphant over this sorcery that gripped his soul, and he would open himself once more to the love of Gilgamesh. But time went on, after the strange circuitous fashion of Hell, and Enkidu did not return to his brother's arms.

What was there to do, but hunt, and wait, and hope?

So this day Gilgamesh hunted in Hell's parched outback. He had killed and killed and killed again, and now late in the day he had put his arrow through the throat of a monster more foul even than the usual run of creatures of Hell; but there was a terrible vitality to the thing, and it went thundering off, dripping dark blood from its pierced maw.

Gilgamesh gave pursuit. It is sinful to strike and wound and not to kill. For a long weary hour he ran, crisscrossing this harsh land. Thorny

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plants slashed at him with the malevolence of imps, and the hard wind flailed him with clouds of dust sharp as whips. Still the evil-looking beast outpaced him, though its blood drained in torrents from it to the dry ground.

Gilgamesh would not let himself tire, for there was god-power in him by virtue of his descent from the divine Lugalbanda, his great father who was both king and god. But he was hard pressed to keep going. Three times he lost sight of his quarry, and tracked it only by the spoor of its blood-droppings. The bleak red motionless eye that was the sun of Hell seemed to mock him, hovering forever before him as though willing him to run without cease.

Then he saw the creature, still strong but plainly staggering, lurching about at the edge of a thicket of little twisted greasy-leaved trees. Unhesitatingly Gilgamesh plunged forward. The trees stroked him lasciviously, coating him with their slime, trying like raucous courtesans to insinuate their leaves between his legs; but he slapped them away, and emerged finally into a clearing where he could confront his animal.

Some repellent little hell-beast was clinging to the back of his prey, ripping out bloody gobbets of flesh and ruining the hide. A Land Rover was parked nearby, and a pale strange-looking man with a long jaw was peering from its window. A second man, red-faced and beefy-looking, stood close by Gilgamesh's roaring, snorting quarry.

First things first. Gilgamesh reached out, scooped the foul hissing little carrion-seeker from the bigger animal's back, flung it aside. Then with all his force he rammed his dagger toward what he hoped was the heart of the wounded animal. In the moment of his thrust Gilgamesh felt a great convulsion within the monster's breast and its hell-life left it in an instant.

The work was done. Again, no exultation, no sense of fulfillment; only a kind of dull ashen release from an unfinished chore. Gilgamesh caught his breath and looked around.

What was this? The red-faced man seemed to be having a crazy fit. Quivering, shaking, sweating—dropping to his knees—his eyes gleaming insanely—

"Lord Conan?" the man cried. "Great king?"

"Conan is not one of my titles," said Gilgamesh, mystified. "And I was a king once in Uruk, but I reign over nothing at all in this place. Come, man, get off your knees!"

"But you are Conan to the life!" moaned the red-faced man hoarsely. "To the absolute life!"

Gilgamesh felt a surge of intense dislike for this fellow. He would be slobbering in another moment. Conan? Conan? That name meant nothing at all. No, wait: he had known a Conan once, some little Celtic fellow

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he had encountered in a tavern, a chap with a blunt nose and heavy cheekbones and dark hair tumbling down his face, a drunken twitchy little man forever invoking forgotten gōdlets of no consequence—yes, he had called himself Conan, so Gilgamesh thought. Drank too much, caused trouble for the barmaid, even took a swing at her, that was the one. Gilgamesh had dropped him down an open cesspool to teach him manners. But how could this blustery-faced fellow here mistake me for that one? He was still mumbling on, too, babbling about lands whose names meant nothing to Gilgamesh—Cimmeria, Aquilonia, Hyrkania, Zamora. Total nonsense. There were no such places.

And that glow in the fellow's eyes—what sort of look was that? A look of adoration, almost the sort of look a woman might give a man when she has decided to yield herself utterly to his will.

Gilgamesh had seen such looks aplenty in his day, from women and men both; and he had welcomed them from women, but never from a man. He scowled. What does he think I am? Does he think, as so many have wrongly thought, that because I loved Enkidu with so great a love that I am a man who will embrace a man in the fashion of men and women? Because it is not so. Not even here in Hell is it so, said Gilgamesh to himself. Nor will it ever be.

"Tell me everything!" the red-faced man was imploring. "All those exploits that I dreamed in your name, Conan: tell me how they really were! That time in the snow-fields, when you met the frost-giant's daughter—and when you sailed the *Tigress* with the Black Coast's queen—and that time you stormed the Aquilonian capital, and slew King Numedides on his own throne—"

Gilgamesh stared in distaste at the man groveling at his feet.

"Come, fellow, stop this blather now," he said sourly. "Up with you! You mistake me greatly, I think."

The second man was out of the Land Rover now, and on his way over to join them. An odd-looking creature he was, too, skeleton-thin and corpse-white, with a neck like a water-bird's that seemed barely able to support his long big-chinned head. He was dressed oddly too, all in black, and swathed in layer upon layer as if he dreaded the faintest chill. Yet he had a gentle and thoughtful way about him, quite unlike the wild-eyed and feverish manner of his friend. He might be a scribe, Gilgamesh thought, or a priest; but what the other one could be, the gods alone would know.

The thin man touched the other's shoulder and said, "Take command of yourself, man. This is surely not your Conan here."

"To the life! To the very life! His size—his grandeur—the way he killed that beast—"

"Bob—Bob, Conan's a figment! Conan's a fantasy! You spun him out

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of whole cloth. Come, now. Up. Up." To Gilgamesh he said, "A thousand pardons, good sir. My friend is—sometimes excitable—"

Gilgamesh turned away, shrugging, and looked to his quarry. He had no need for dealings with these two. Skinning the huge beast properly might take him the rest of the day; and then to haul the great hide back to his camp, and determine what he wanted of it as a trophy—

Behind him he heard the booming voice of the red-faced man. "A figment, H.P.? How can you be sure of that? I thought I invented Conan too; but what if he really lived, what if I had merely tapped into some powerful primordial archetype, what if the authentic Conan stands here before us this very moment—"

"Dear Bob, your Conan had blue eyes, did he not? And this man's eyes are dark as night."

"Well—" Grudgingly.

"You were so excited you failed to notice. But I did. This is some barbarian warrior, yes, some great huntsman beyond any doubt, a Nimrod, an Ajax. But not Conan, Bob! Grant him his own identity. He's no invention of yours." Coming up beside Gilgamesh the long-jawed man said, speaking in a formal and courtly way, "Good sir, I am Howard Phillips Lovecraft, formerly of Providence, Rhode Island, and my companion is Robert E. Howard of Texas, whose other life was lived, as was mine, in the twentieth century after Christ. At that time we were tale-tellers by trade, and I think he confuses you with a hero of his own devising. Put his mind at ease, I pray you, and let us know your name."

Gilgamesh looked up. He rubbed his wrist across his forehead to clear it of a smear of the monster's gore and met the other man's gaze evenly. This one, at least, was no madman, strange though he looked.

Quietly Gilgamesh said, "I think his mind may be beyond putting at any ease. But know you that I am called Gilgamesh, the son of Lugalbanda."

"Gilgamesh the Sumerian?" Lovecraft whispered. "Gilgamesh who sought to live forever?"

"Gilgamesh am I, yes, who was king in Uruk when that was the greatest city of the Land of the Two Rivers, and who in his folly thought there was a way of cheating death."

"Do you hear that, Bob?"

"Incredible. Beyond all belief!" muttered the other.

Rising until he towered above them both, Gilgamesh drew in his breath deeply and said with awesome resonance, "I am Gilgamesh to whom all things were made known, the secret things, the truths of life and death, most especially those of death. I have coupled with Inanna the goddess in the bed of the Sacred Marriage; I have slain demons and spoken with gods; I am two parts god myself, and only one part mortal." He paused

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and stared at them, letting it sink in, those words that he had recited so many times in situations much like this. Then in a quieter tone he went on, "When death took me I came to this nether world they call Hell, and here I pass my time as a huntsman, and I ask you now to excuse me, for as you see I have my tasks."

Once more he turned away.

"Gilgamesh!" said Lovecraft again in wonder. And the other said, "If I live here till the end of time, H.P., I'll never grow used to it. This is more fantastic than running into Conan would have been! Imagine it: *Gilgamesh!*"

A tiresome business, Gilgamesh thought: all this awe, all this adulation.

The problem was that damned epic, of course. He could see why Caesar grew so irritable when people tried to suck up to him with quotations out of Shakespeare's verses. "Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus," and all that: Caesar grew livid by the third syllable. Once they put you into poetry, Gilgamesh had discovered, as had Odysseus and Achilles and Caesar after him and many another, your own real self can begin to disappear and the self of the poem overwhelms you entirely and turns you into a walking cliche. Shakespeare had been particularly villainous that way, Gilgamesh thought: ask Richard III, ask Macbeth, ask Owen Glendower. You found them skulking around Hell with perpetual chips on their shoulders, because every time they opened their mouths people expected them to say something like "My kingdom for a horse!" or "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" or "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." Gilgamesh had had to live with that kind of thing almost from the time he had first come to Hell; for they had written the poems about him soon after, all that pompous brooding stuff, a whole raft of Gilgamesh tales of varying degrees of basis in reality, and then the Babylonians and the Assyrians and even those smelly garlic-gobbling Hittites had gone on translating and embroidering them for another thousand years so that everybody from one end of the known world to the other knew them by heart, and even after all those peoples were gone and their languages had been forgotten there was no surcease, because these twentieth-century folk had found the whole thing and deciphered the text somehow and made it famous all over again. Over the centuries they had turned him into everybody's favorite all-purpose hero, which was a hell of a burden to bear: there was a piece of him in the Prometheus legend, and in the Heracles stuff, and in that story of Odysseus's wanderings, and even in the Celtic myths, which was probably why this creepy Howard fellow kept calling him Conan. At least that other Conan, that ratty little sniveling drunken one, had been a Celt. Enlil's ears, but it was wearying to have everyone expecting you

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to live up to the mythic exploits of twenty or thirty very different culture-heroes! And embarrassing, too, considering that the original non-mythical Heracles and Odysseus and some of the others dwelled here too and tended to be pretty possessive about the myths that had attached to *them*, even when they were simply variants on his own much older ones.

There was substance to the Gilgamesh stories, of course, especially the parts about him and Enkidu; but the poet had salted the story with a lot of pretentious arty nonsense too, as poets always will, and in any case you got very tired of having everybody boil your long and complex life down into the same twelve chapters and the same little turns of phrase. It got so that Gilgamesh found himself quoting the main Gilgamesh poem too, the one about his quest for eternal life—well, that one wasn't too far from the essence of the truth, though they had mucked up a lot of the details with precious little "imaginative" touches—by way of making introduction for himself: "I am the man to whom all things were made known, the secret things, the truths of life and death." Straight out of the poet's mouth, those lines. Tiresome. Tiresome. Angrily he jabbed his dagger beneath the dead monster's hide, and set about his task of flaying, while the two little men behind him went on muttering and mumbling to one another in astonishment at having run into Gilgamesh of Uruk in this bleak and lonely corner of Hell.

There were strange emotions stirring in Robert Howard's soul, and he did not care for them at all. He could forgive himself for believing for that one giddy moment that this Gilgamesh was his Conan. That was nothing more than the artistic temperament at work, sweeping him up in a fit of rash feverish enthusiasm. To come suddenly upon a great muscular giant of a man in a loincloth who was hacking away at some fiendish monster with a little bronze dagger, and to think that he must surely be the mighty Cimmerian—well, that was a pardonable enough thing. Here in Hell you learned very quickly that you might run into anybody at all. You could find yourself playing at dice with Lord Byron or sharing a mug of mulled wine with Menelaus or arguing with Plato about the ideas of Nietzsche, who was standing right there making faces, and after a time you came to take most such things for granted, more or less.

So why not think that this fellow was Conan? No matter that Conan's eyes had been of a different color. That was a trifle. He looked like Conan in all the important ways. He was of Conan's size and strength. And he was kingly in more than physique. He seemed to have Conan's cool intelligence and complexity of soul, Conan's regal courage and Conan's indomitable spirit.

The trouble was that Conan, the wondrous Cimmerian warrior from

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19,000 B.C., had never existed except in Howard's own imagination. And there were no fictional characters in Hell. You might meet Richard Wagner, but you weren't likely to encounter Siegfried. William the Conqueror, yes; William Tell, no.

That was all right, Howard told himself. His little fantasy of meeting Conan here in Hell was nothing but a bit of mawkish narcissism: he was better off without it. Coming across the authentic Gilgamesh—ah, how much more interesting that was! A genuine Sumerian king—an actual titan out of history's dawn, not some trumped-up figure fashioned from cardboard and hard-breathing wish-fulfilling dreams; a flesh-and-blood mortal who had lived a lusty life and had fought great battles and had walked eye to eye with the ancient gods and had struggled against the inevitability of death, and who in dying had taken on the immortality of mythic archetype—ah, now there was someone worth getting to know! Whereas Howard had to admit that he would have no more to learn from a conversation with Conan than he could discover by interrogating his own image in the mirror. Or else a meeting with the "real" Conan, if it was in any way possible, would surely cast him into terrible confusions and contradictions of soul from which there would be no recovering. No, Howard thought, better that this man be Gilgamesh than Conan, by all means. He was reconciled to that.

But this other business—this sudden bewildering urge to throw himself at the giant's feet, to be swept up in his arms, to be crushed in a fierce embrace—

What was that? Where had *that* come from? By the blazing Heart of Ahriman, what could it mean?

Howard remembered a time in his former life when he had gone down to the Cisco Dam and watched the construction men strip and dive in: well-built men, confident, graceful, at ease in their bodies. For a short while he had looked at them and had reveled in their physical perfection. They could have been naked Greek statues come alive, a band of lusty Apollos and Zeuses. And then as he listened to them shouting and laughing and crying out in their foul-mouthed way he began to grow angry, suddenly seeing them as mere thoughtless animals who were the natural enemies of dreamers like himself. He hated them as the weak always must hate the strong, those splendid swine who could trample the dreamers and their dreams as they wished. But then he had reminded himself that he was no weakling himself, that he who once had been spindly and frail had by hard effort made himself big and strong and burly. Not beautiful of body as these men were—too fleshy for that, too husky—but nevertheless, he had told himself, there was no man there whose ribs he could not crush if it came to a struggle. And he had gone away from that place full of rage and thoughts of bloody violence.

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What had that been all about? That barely suppressed fury—was it some sort of dark hidden lust, some craving for the most bestial sort of sinfulness? Was the anger that had arisen in him masking an anger he should have directed at himself, for looking upon those naked men and taking pleasure in it?

No. No. No. No. He wasn't any kind of degenerate. He was certain of that.

The desire of men for men was a mark of decadence, of the decline of civilization. He was a man of the frontier, not some feeble limp-wristed sodomite who reveled in filth and wanton evil. If he had never in his short life known a woman's love, it was for lack of opportunity, not out of a preference for that other shameful kind. Living out his days in that small and remote prairie town, devoting himself to his mother and to his writing, he had chosen not to avail himself of prostitutes or shallow women, but he was sure that if he had lived a few years longer and the woman who was his true mate had ever made herself known to him, he would certainly have reached toward her in passion and high abandon.

And yet—and yet—that moment when he first spied the giant Gilgamesh, and thought he was Conan—

That surge of electricity through his entire body, and most intensely through his loins—what else could it have been but desire, instant and intense and overwhelming? For a *man*? Unthinkable! Even this glorious hero—even this magnificent kingly creature—

No. No. No. No.

I am in Hell, and this is my torment, Howard told himself.

He paced furiously up and down alongside the Land Rover. Desperately he fought off the black anguish that threatened to settle over him now, as it had done so many times in his former life and in this life after life. These sudden corrupt and depraved feelings, Howard thought: they are nothing but diabolical perversions of my natural spirit, intended to cast me into despair and self-loathing! By Crom, I will resist! By the breasts of Ishtar, I will not yield to this foulness!

All the same he found his eyes straying to the edge of the nearby thicket, where Gilgamesh still knelt over the animal he had killed.

What extraordinary muscles rippling in that broad back, in those iron-hard thighs! What careless abandon in the way he was peeling back the creature's shaggy hide, though he had to wallow in dark gore to do it! That cascade of lustrous black hair lightly bound by a jewelled circlet, that dense black beard curling in tight ringlets

Howard's throat went dry. Something at the base of his belly was tightening into a terrible knot.

Lovecraft said, "You want a chance to talk with him, don't you?"

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Howard swung around. He felt his cheeks go scarlet. He was utterly certain that his guilt must be emblazoned incontrovertibly on his face.

"What the hell do you mean?" he growled. His hands knotted of their own accord into fists. There seemed to be a band of fire across his forehead. "What would I want to talk with him about, anyway?"

Lovecraft looked startled by the ferocity of Howard's tone and posture. He took a step backward and threw up his hand almost as though to protect himself. "What a strange thing to say! You, of all people, with your love of antique times, your deep and abiding passion for the lost mysteries of those steamy Oriental empires that perished so long ago! Why, man, is there nothing you want to know about the kingdoms of Sumer? Uruk, Nippur, Ur of the Chaldees? The secret rites of the goddess Inanna in the dark passageways beneath the ziggurat? The incantations that opened the gates of the Underworld, the libations that loosed and bound the demons of the worlds beyond the stars? Who knows what he could tell us? There stands a man six thousand years old, a hero from the dawn of time, Bob!"

Howard snorted. "I don't reckon that oversized son of a bitch would want to tell us a damned thing. All that interests him is getting the hide off that bloody critter of his."

"He's nearly done with that. Why not wait, Bob? And invite him to sit with us a little while. And draw him out, lure him into telling us tales of life beside the Euphrates!" Now Lovecraft's dark eyes were gleaming as though he too felt some strange lust, and his forehead was surprisingly bright with uncharacteristic perspiration; but Howard knew that in Lovecraft's case what had taken possession of him was only the lust for knowledge, the hunger for the arcane lore of high antiquity that Lovecraft imagined would spill from the lips of this Mesopotamian hero. That same lust ached in him as well. To speak with this man who had lived before Babylon was, who had walked the streets of Ur when Abraham was yet unborn—

But there were other lusts besides that hunger for knowledge, sinister lusts that must be denied at any cost—

"No," said Howard brusquely. "Let's get the hell out of here right now, H.P. This damned foul bleak countryside is getting on my nerves."

Lovecraft gave him a strange look. "But weren't you just telling me how beautiful—

"Damnation take whatever I was telling you! King Henry's expecting us to negotiate an alliance for him. We aren't going to get the job done out here in the boondocks."

"The what?"

"Boondocks. Wild uncivilized country. Term that came into use after our time, H.P. The back woods, you know? You never did pay much heed

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to the vernacular, did you?" He tugged at Lovecraft's sleeve. "Come on. That big bloody ape over there isn't going to tell us a thing about his life and times, I guarantee. Probably doesn't remember anything worth telling, anyway. And he bores me. Pardon me, H.P., but I find him an enormous pain in the butt, all right? I don't have any further hankering for his company. Do you mind, H.P.? Can we move along, do you think?"

"I must confess that you mystify me sometimes, Bob. But of course if you—" Suddenly Lovecraft's eyes widened in amazement. "Get down, Bob! Behind the car! Fast!"

"What—"

An arrow came singing through the air and passed just alongside Howard's left ear. Then another, and another. One arrow ricocheted off the flank of the Land Rover with a sickening thunking sound. Another struck straight on and stuck quivering an inch deep in the metal.

Howard whirled. He saw horsemen, a dozen, perhaps a dozen and a half, bearing down on them out of the darkness to the east, loosing shafts as they came.

They were lean compact men of some Oriental stock in crimson leather jerkins, riding like fiends. Their mounts were little flat-headed fiery-eyed gray Hell-horses that moved as if their short, fiercely pistoning legs could carry them to the far boundaries of the nether world without the need of a moment's rest.

Chanting, howling, the yellow-skinned warriors seemed to be in a frenzy of rage. Mongols? Turks? Whoever they were, they were pounding toward the Land Rover like the emissaries of Death himself. Some brandished long, wickedly curved blades, but most wielded curious-looking small bows from which they showered one arrow after another with phenomenal rapidity.

Crouching behind the Land Rover with Lovecraft beside him, Howard gaped at the attackers in a paralysis of astonishment. How often had he written of scenes like this? Waving plumes, bristling lances, a whistling cloud of cloth-yard shafts! Thundering hooves, wild war-cries, the thunk of barbarian arrowheads against Aquilonian shields! Horses rearing and throwing their riders. . . . Knights in bloodied armor tumbling to the ground. . . . Steel-clad forms littering the slopes of the battlefield. . . .

But this was no swashbuckling tale of Hyborean derring-do that was unfolding now. Those were real horsemen—as real as anything was, in this place—rampaging across this chilly wind-swept plain in the outer reaches of Hell. Those were real arrows; and they would rip their way into his flesh with real impact and inflict real agony of the most frightful kind.

He looked across the way at Gilgamesh. The giant Sumerian was hunkered down behind the overturned bulk of the animal he had slain.

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His mighty bow was in his hand. As Howard watched in awe, Gilgamesh aimed and let fly. The shaft struck the nearest horseman, traveling through jerkin and rib-cage and all and emerging from the man's back. But still the onrushing warrior managed to release one last arrow before he fell. It traveled on an erratic trajectory, humming quickly toward Gilgamesh on a wild wobbly arc and skewering him through the flesh of his left forearm.

Coolly the Sumerian glanced down at the arrow jutting from his arm. He scowled and shook his head, the way he might if he had been stung by a hornet. Then—as Conan might have done; how very much like Conan!—Gilgamesh inclined his head toward his shoulder and *bit* the arrow in half just below the fletching. Bright blood spouted from the wound as he pulled the two pieces of the arrow from his arm.

As though nothing very significant had happened, Gilgamesh lifted his bow and reached for a second shaft. Blood was streaming in rivulets down his arm, but he seemed not even to be aware of it.

Howard watched as if in a stupor. He could not move, he barely had the will to draw breath. A haze of nausea threatened to overwhelm him. It had been nothing at all for him to heap up great bloody mounds of severed heads and arms and legs with cheerful abandon in his stories; but in fact real bloodshed and violence of any sort had horrified him whenever he had even a glimpse of it.

"The gun, Bob!" said Lovecraft urgently beside him. "Use the *gun*!"

"What?"

"There. There."

Howard looked down. Thrust through his belt was the pistol he had taken from the Land Rover when he had come out to investigate that little beast in the road. He drew it now and stared at it, glassy-eyed, as though it were a basilisk's egg that rested on the palm of his hand.

"What are you doing?" Lovecraft asked. "Ah. Ah. Give it to me." He snatched the gun impatiently from Howard's frozen fingers and studied it a moment as though he had never held a weapon before. Perhaps he never had. But then, grasping the pistol with both his hands, he rose warily above the hood of the Land Rover and squeezed off a shot.

The tremendous sound of an explosion cut through the shrill cries of the horsemen. Lovecraft laughed. "Got one! Who would ever have imagined—"

He fired again. In the same moment Gilgamesh brought down one more of the attackers with his bow.

"They're backing off!" Lovecraft cried. "By Alhazred, they didn't expect *this*, I wager!" He laughed again and poked the gun up into a firing position. "*Ia!*" he cried, in a voice Howard had never heard out of the

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shy and scholarly Lovecraft before. *"Shub-Niggurath!"* Lovecraft fired a third time. *"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!"*

Howard felt sweat rolling down his body. This inaction of his—this paralysis—this shame—what would Conan make of it? What would Gilgamesh? And Lovecraft, that timid and sheltered man, who dreaded the fishes of the sea and the cold winds of his New England winters and so many other things, was laughing and bellowing his wondrous gibberish and blazing away like any gangster, having the time of his life—

Shame! Shame!

Heedless of the risk Howard scrambled up into the cab of the Land Rover and groped around for the second gun that was lying down there on the floor somewhere. He found it and knelt beside the window. Seven or eight of the Asiatic horsemen lay strewn about, dead or dying, within a hundred-yard radius of the car. The others had withdrawn to a considerable distance and were cantering in uneasy circles. They appeared taken aback by the unexpectedly fierce resistance they had encountered on what they had probably expected to have been an easy bit of jolly slaughter in these untracked frontierlands.

What were they doing now? Drawing together, a tight little group, horses nose to nose. Conferring. And now two of them were pulling what seemed to be some sort of war-banner from a saddlebag and hoisting it between them on bamboo poles: a long yellow streamer with fluttering blood-red tips, on which bold Oriental characters were painted in shining black. Serious business, obviously. Now they were lining themselves up in a row, facing the Land Rover. Getting ready for a desperate suicide charge—that was the way things appeared.

Gilgamesh, standing erect in full view, calmly nocked yet another arrow. He took aim and waited for them to come. Lovecraft, looking flushed with excitement, wholly transformed by the alien joys of armed combat, was leaning forward, staring intently, his pistol cocked and ready.

Howard shivered. Shame rode him with burning spurs. How *could* he cower here while those two bore the brunt of the struggle? Though his hand was shaking, he thrust the pistol out the window and drew a bead on the closest horseman. His finger tightened on the trigger. Would it be possible to score a hit at such a distance? Yes. Yes. Go ahead. You know how to use a gun, all right. High time you put some of that skill to use. Knock that little yellow bastard off his horse with one bark of the Colt .380, yes. Send him straight to Hell—no, he's in Hell already, send him off to the Undertaker for recycling, yes, that's it—ready—aim—

"Wait," Lovecraft said. "Don't shoot."

What was this? As Howard, with an effort, lowered his gun and let his rigid quivering hand go slack, Lovecraft, shading his eyes against the

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eerie glare of the motionless sun, peered closely at the enemy warriors a long silent moment. Then he turned, reached up into the rear of the Land Rover, groped around for a moment, finally pulled out the manila envelope that held their royal commission from King Henry.

And then—what was he doing?

Stepping out into plain view, arms raised high, waving the envelope around, walking toward the enemy?

"They'll kill you, H.P.! Get down! Get down!"

Lovecraft, without looking back, gestured brusquely for Howard to be silent. He continued to walk steadily toward the far-off horsemen. They seemed just as mystified as Howard was. They sat without moving, their bows held stiffly out before them, a dozen arrows trained on the middle of Lovecraft's body.

He's gone completely off the deep end, Howard thought in dismay. He never was really well balanced, was he? Half believing all his stuff about Elder Gods and dimensional gateways and blasphemous rites on dark New England hillsides. And now all this shooting—the excitement—

"Hold your weapons, all of you!" Lovecraft cried in a voice of amazing strength and presence. "In the name of Prester John, I bid you hold your weapons! We are not your enemies! We are ambassadors to your emperor!"

Howard gasped. He began to understand. No, Lovecraft hadn't gone crazy after all!

He took another look at that long yellow war-banner. Yes, yes, it bore the emblems of Prester John! These berserk horsemen must be part of the border patrol of the very nation whose ruler they had traveled so long to find. Howard felt abashed, realizing that in the fury of the battle Lovecraft had had the sense actually to pause long enough to give the banner's legend close examination—and the courage to walk out there waving his diplomatic credentials. The parchment scroll of their royal commission was in his hand, and he was pointing to the little red-ribboned seal of King Henry.

The horsemen stared, muttered among themselves, lowered their bows. Gilgamesh, lowering his great bow also, looked on in puzzlement. "Do you see?" Lovecraft called. "We are heralds of King Henry! We claim the protection of your master the August Sovereign Yeh-lu Ta-shih!" Glancing back over his shoulder, he called to Howard to join him; and after only an instant's hesitation Howard leaped down from the Land Rover and trotted forward. It was a giddy feeling, exposing himself to those somber yellow archers this way. It felt almost like standing at the edge of some colossal precipice.

Lovecraft smiled. "It's all going to be all right, Bob! That banner they unfurled—it bears the markings of Prester John—"

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"Yes, yes. I see."

"And look—they're making a safe-conduct sign. They understand what I'm saying, Bob! They believe me!"

Howard nodded. He felt a great upsurge of relief and even a sort of joy. He clapped Lovecraft lustily on the back. "Fine going, H.P.! I didn't think you had it in you!" Coming up out of his funk, now, he felt a manic exuberance seize his spirit. He gestured to the horsemen, wigwagging his arms with wild vigor. "Hoy! Royal commissioners!" he bellowed "Envoys from His Britannic Majesty King Henry VIII! Take us to your emperor!" Then he looked toward Gilgamesh, who stood frowning, his bow still at the ready. "Hoy there, king of Uruk! Put away the weapons! Everything's all right now! We're going to be escorted to the court of Prester John!"

Gilgamesh wasn't at all sure why he had let himself go along. He had no interest in visiting Prester John's court, or anybody else's. He wanted nothing more than to be left alone to hunt and roam in the wilderness and thereby to find some ease for his sorrows.

But the gaunt long-necked man and his blustery red-faced friend had beckoned him to ride with them in their Land Rover, and while he stood there frowning over that the ugly flat-featured little yellow warriors had indicated with quick impatient gestures that he should get in. And he had. They looked as though they would try to compel him to get in if he balked; and though he had no fear of them, none whatever, some impulse that he could not begin to understand had led him to step back from the likelihood of yet another battle and simply climb aboard the vehicle. Perhaps he had had enough of solitary hunting for a while. Or perhaps it was just that the wound in his arm was beginning to throb and ache, now that the excitement of the fray was receding, and it seemed like a good idea to have it looked after by a surgeon. The flesh all around it was badly swollen and bruised. That arrow had pierced him through and through. He would have the wound cleaned and dressed; and then he would move along.

Well, then, so he was going to the court of Prester John. Here he was, sitting back silent and somber in the rear of this musty mildew-flecked car, riding with these two very odd New Dead types, these scribes or tale-tellers or whatever it was they claimed to be, as the horsemen of Prester John led them to the encampment of their monarch.

The one who called himself Howard, the one who could not help stealing sly little glances at him like an infatuated schoolgirl, was at the wheel. Glancing back at his passenger now, he said, "Tell me, Gilgamesh: have you had dealings with Prester John before?"

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"I have heard the name, that much I know," replied the Sumerian. "But it means very little to me."

"The legendary Christian emperor," said the other, the thin one, Lovecraft. "He who was said to rule a secret kingdom somewhere in the misty hinterlands of Central Asia—although it was in Africa, according to some—"

Asia—Africa—names, only names, Gilgamesh thought bleakly. They were places somewhere in the other world, but he had no idea where they might be.

Such a multitude of places, so many names! It was impossible to keep it all straight. There was no sense to any of it. The world—his world—the Land—had been bordered by the Two Rivers, the Idigna and the Buranunu, which the Greeks had preferred to call the Tigris and the Euphrates. Who were the Greeks, and by what right had they renamed the rivers? Everyone used those names now, even Gilgamesh himself, except in the inwardness of his soul.

And beyond the Two Rivers? Why, there was the vassal state of Aratta far to the east, and in that direction also lay the Land of Cedars where the fire-breathing demon Huwawa roared and bellowed, and in the eastern mountains lay the kingdom of the barbaric Elamites. To the north was the land called Uri, and in the deserts of the west the wild Martu people dwelled, and in the south was the blessed isle Dilmun, which was like a paradise. Was there anything more to the world than that? Why, there was Meluhha far away beyond Elam, where the people had black skins and fine features, and there was Punt in the south where they were black also with flat noses and thick lips, and there was another land even beyond Meluhha, with folk of yellow skins who mined a precious green stone. And that was the world. Where could all these other latter-day places be, this Africa and this Asia and Europe and the rest, Rome, Greece, England? Perhaps some of them were mere new names for old places. The Land itself had had a host of names since his own time—Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Iraq, and more. Why had it needed all those names? He had no idea. New men made up new names: that seemed to be the way of the world. This Africa, this Asia—America, China, Russia—a little man named Herodotos, a Greek, had tried to explain it all to him once, the shape of the world and the names of the places in it, sketching a map for him on an old bit of parchment, and much later a stolid fellow named Mercator had done the same, and once after that he had spoken of such matters with an Englishman called Cook; but the things they told him all conflicted with one another and he could make no sense out of any of it. It was too much to ask, making sense of these things. Those myriad nations that had arisen after his time, those empires that had risen and fallen and been forgotten, all those lost dynasties,

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the captains and the kings—he had tried from time to time to master the sequence of them, but it was no use. Once in his former life he had sought to make himself the master of all knowledge, yes. His appetites had been boundless: for knowledge, for wealth, for power, for women, for life itself. Now all that seemed only the merest folly to him. That jumble of confused and confusing places, all those great realms and far-off kingdoms, were in another world: what could they matter to him now?

"Asia?" he said. "Africa?" Gilgamesh shrugged. "Prester John?" He prowled the turbulent cluttered recesses of his memory. "Ah. There's a Prester John, I think, lives in New Hell. A dark-skinned man, a friend of that gaudy old liar Sir John Mandeville." It was coming back now. "Yes, I've seen them together many times, in that dirty squalid tavern where Mandeville's always to be found. The two of them telling outlandish stories back and forth, each a bigger fraud than the other."

"A different Prester John," said Lovecraft.

"That one is Susenyos the Ethiop, I think," Howard said. "A former African tyrant, and lover of the Jesuits, now far gone in whiskey. He's one of many. There are seven, nine, a dozen Prester Johns in Hell, to my certain knowledge. And maybe more."

Gilgamesh contemplated that notion blankly. Fire was running up and down his injured arm now.

Lovecraft was saying, "—not a true name, but merely a title, and a corrupt one at that. There never was a *real* Prester John, only various rulers in various distant places, whom it pleased the tale-spinners of Europe to speak of as Prester John, the Christian emperor, the great mysterious unknown monarch of a fabulous realm. And here in Hell there are many who choose to wear the name. There's power in it, do you see?"

"Power and majesty!" Howard cried. "And poetry, by God!"

"So this Prester John whom we are to visit," said Gilgamesh, "he is not in fact Prester John?"

"Yeh-lu Ta-shih's his name," said Howard. "Chinese. Manchurian, actually, twelfth century A.D. First emperor of the realm of Kara-Khitai, with his capital at Samarkand. Ruled over a bunch of Mongols and Turks, mainly, and they called him Gur Khan, which means 'supreme ruler,' and somehow that turned into 'John' by the time it got to Europe. And they said he was a Christian priest, too, *Presbyter Joannes*, 'Prester John.' " Howard laughed. "Damned silly bastards. He was no more a Christian than you were. A Buddhist, he was, a bloody shamanistic Buddhist."

"Then why—"

"Myth and confusion!" Howard said. "The great human nonsense factory at work! And wouldn't you know it, but when he got to Hell this

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Yeh-lu Ta-shih founded himself another empire right away in the same sort of territory he'd lived in back there, and when Richard Burton came out this way and told him about Prester John and how Europeans long ago had spoken of him by that name and ascribed all sorts of fabulous accomplishments to him he said, Yes, yes, I am Prester John indeed. And so he styles himself that way now, he and nine or ten others, most of them Ethiopians like that friend of your friend Mandeville."

"They are no friends of mine," said Gilgamesh stiffly. He leaned back and massaged his aching arm. Outside the Land Rover the landscape was changing now: more hilly, with ill-favored fat-trunked little trees jutting at peculiar angles from the purple soil. Here and there in the distance his keen eyes made out scattered groups of black tents on the hillsides, and herds of the little hell-horses grazing near them. Gilgamesh wished now that he hadn't let himself be inveigled into this expedition. What need had he of Prester John? One of those upstart New Dead potentates, one of the innumerable little princelings who had set up minor dominions for themselves out here in the vast measureless wastelands of the Outback—and reigning under a false name, at that—one more shoddy scoundrel. One more puffed-up little nobody swollen with unearned pride—

Well, and what difference did it make? He would sojourn a while in the land of this Prester John, and then he would move on, alone, apart from others, mourning as always his lost Enkidu. There seemed no escaping that doom that lay upon him, that bitter solitude, whether he reigned in splendor in Uruk or wandered in the wastes of Hell.

"Their Excellencies P.E. Lovecraft and Howard E. Robert," cried the major-domo grandly though inaccurately, striking three times on the black marble floor of Prester John's throne-chamber with his gold-tipped staff of pale green jade. "Envoys Plenipotentiary of His Britannic Majesty King Henry VIII of the Kingdom of New Holy Diabolic England."

Lovecraft and Howard took a couple of steps forward. Yeh-lu Ta-shih nodded curtly and waved one elegant hand, resplendent with inch-long fingernails, in casual acknowledgment. The envoys plenipotentiary did not seem to hold much interest for him, nor, apparently, did whatever it was that had caused His Britannic Majesty King Henry to send them here.

The emperor's cool imperious glance turned toward Gilgamesh, who was struggling to hold himself erect. He was beginning to feel feverish and dizzy and he wondered when anyone would notice that there was an oozing hole in his arm. Even he had limits to his endurance, after all, though he usually tried to conceal that fact. He didn't know how much

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longer he could hold out. There were times when behaving like a hero was a heroic pain in the ass, and this was one of them.

"—and his Late Highness Gilgamesh of Uruk son of Lugalbanda, great king, king of Uruk, king of kings, lord of the Land of the Two Rivers by merit of Enlil and An," boomed the major-domo in the same splendid way, looking down only once at the card he held in his hand.

"Great king?" said Yeh-lu Ta-shih, fixing Gilgamesh with one of the most intensely penetrating stares the Sumerian could remember ever having received. "King of kings? Those are very lofty titles, Gilgamesh of Uruk."

"A mere formula," Gilgamesh replied, "which I thought appropriate when being presented at your court. In fact I am king of nothing at all now."

"Ah," said Yeh-lu Ta-shih. "King of Nothing-at-all."

And so are you, my lord Prester John. Gilgamesh did not let himself say it, though the words bubbled toward the roof of his mouth and begged to be uttered. *And so are all the self-appointed lords and masters of the many realms of Hell.*

The slender amber-hued man on the throne leaned forward. "And where then, I pray, is Nothing-at-all?"

Some of the courtiers began to snicker. But Prester John looked to be altogether in earnest, though it was impossible to be completely certain of that. He was plainly a formidable man, Gilgamesh had quickly come to see: sly, shrewd, self-contained, with a tough and sinewy intelligence. Not at all the vain little cock-of-the-walk Gilgamesh had expected to find in this bleak and remote corner of Hell. However small and obscure his principality might be, Prester John ruled it, obviously, with a firm grasp. The grandeur of the glittering palace that his scruffy subjects had built for him here on the edge of nowhere, and the solidity of the small but substantial city surrounding it, testified to that. Gilgamesh knew something about the building of cities and palaces. Prester John's capital bore the mark of the steady toil of centuries.

The long stare was unrelenting. Gilgamesh, fighting back the blazing pain in his arm, met the emperor's gaze with an equally earnest one of his own and said:

"Nothing-at-all? It is a land that never was, and will always be, my lord. Its boundaries are nowhere and its capital city is everywhere, nor do any of us ever leave it."

"Ah. Ah. Indeed. Nicely put. You are Old Dead, are you?"

"Very old, my lord."

"Older than Ch'in Shih Huang Ti? Older than the Lords of Shang and Hsia?"

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Gilgamesh turned in puzzlement toward Lovecraft, who told him in a half-whisper, "Ancient kings of China. Your time was even earlier."

Shrugging, Gilgamesh replied, "They are not known to me, my lord, but you hear what the Britannic ambassador says. He is a man of learning: it must be so. I will tell you that I am older than Caesar by far, older than Agamemnon and the Supreme Commander Rameses, older even than Sargon. By a great deal."

Yeh-lu Ta-shih considered that a moment. Then he made another of his little gestures of dismissal, as though brushing aside the whole concept of relative ages in Hell. With a dry laugh he said, "So you are very old, King Gilgamesh. I congratulate you. And yet the Ice-Hunter folk would tell us that you and I and Rameses and Sargon all arrived here only yesterday; and to the Hairy Men, the Ice-Hunters themselves are mere newcomers. And so on and so on. There's no beginning to it, is there? Any more than there's an end."

Without waiting for an answer he asked Gilgamesh, "How did you come by that gory wound, great king of Nothing-at-all?"

At least he's noticed it, Gilgamesh thought.

"A misunderstanding, my lord. It may be that your border patrol is a little over-zealous at times."

One of the courtiers leaned toward the emperor and murmured something. Prester John's serene brow grew furrowed. He lifted a flawlessly contoured eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Killed nine of them, did you?"

"They attacked us before we had the opportunity of showing our diplomatic credentials," Lovecraft put in quickly. "It was entirely a matter of self-defense, my lord Prester John."

"I wouldn't doubt it." The emperor seemed to contemplate for a moment, but only for a moment, the skirmish that had cost the lives of nine of his horsemen; and then quite visibly he dismissed that matter too from the center of his attention. "Well, now, my lords ambassador—"

Abruptly Gilgamesh swayed, tottered, started to fall. He checked himself just barely in time, seizing a massive porphyry column and clinging to it until he felt more steady. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead into his eyes. He began to shiver. The huge stone column seemed to be expanding and contracting. Waves of vertigo were rippling through him and he was seeing double, suddenly. Everything was blurring and multiplying. He drew his breath in deeply, again, again, forcing himself to hold on. He wondered if Prester John was playing some kind of game with him, trying to see how long his strength could last. Well, if he had to, Gilgamesh swore, he would stand here forever in front of Prester John without showing a hint of weakness.

But now Yeh-lu Ta-shih was at last willing to extend compassion. With

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a glance toward one of his pages the emperor said, "Summon my physician, and tell him to bring his tools and his potions. That wound should have been dressed an hour ago."

"Thank you, my lord," Gilgamesh muttered, trying to keep the irony from his tone.

The doctor appeared almost at once, as though he had been waiting in an antechamber. Another of Prester John's little games, perhaps? He was a burly, broad-shouldered, bushy-haired man of more than middle years, with a manner about him that was brisk and bustling but nevertheless warm, concerned, reassuring. Drawing Gilgamesh down beside him on a low divan covered with the gray-green hide of some scaly Hell-dragon, he peered into the wound, muttered something unintelligible to himself in a guttural language unknown to the Sumerian, and pressed his thick fingers around the edges of the torn flesh until fresh blood flowed. Gilgamesh hissed sharply but did not flinch.

"*Ach, mein lieber freund,* I must hurt you again, but it is for your own good. *Verstehen sie?*"

The doctor's fingers dug in more deeply. He was spreading the wound, swabbing it, cleansing it with some clear fluid that stung like a hot iron. The pain was so intense that there was almost a kind of pleasure in it: it was a purifying kind of pain, a purging of the soul.

Prester John said, "How bad is it, Dr. Schweitzer?"

"*Gott sei dank,* it is deep but clean. He will heal without damage."

He continued to probe and cleanse, murmuring softly to Gilgamesh as he worked: "*Bitte. Bitte. Einen augenblick, mein freund.*" To Prester John he said, "This man is made of steel. No nerves at all, immense resistance to pain. We have one of the great heroes here, *nicht wahr*? You are Roland, are you? Achilles, perhaps?"

"Gilgamesh is his name," said Yeh-lu Ta-shih.

The doctor's eyes grew bright. "Gilgamesh! Gilgamesh of Sumer? *Wunderbar! Wunderbar!* The very man. The seeker after life. *Ach,* we must talk, my friend, you and I, when you are feeling better." From his medical kit he now produced a frightful-looking hypodermic syringe. Gilgamesh watched as though from a vast distance, as though that throbbing swollen arm belonged to someone else. "*Ja, Ja,* certainly we must talk, of life, of death, of philosophy, *mein freund,* of *philosophy!* There is so very much for us to discuss!" He slipped the needle beneath Gilgamesh's skin. "There. *Genug.* Sit. Rest. The healing now begins."

Robert Howard had never seen anything like it. It could have been something straight from the pages of one of his Conan stories. The big ox had taken an arrow right through the fat part of his arm, and he had simply yanked it out and gone right on fighting. Then, afterward, he had

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behaved as if the wound were nothing more than a scratch, all that time while they were driving hour after hour toward Prester John's city and then undergoing lengthy interrogation by the court officials and then standing through this whole endless ceremony at court—God almighty, what a display of endurance! True, Gilgamesh had finally gone a little wobbly and had actually seemed on the verge of passing out. But any ordinary mortal would have conked out long ago. Heroes really *were* different. They were another breed altogether. Look at him now, sitting there casually while that old German medic swabs him out and stitches him up in that slapdash cavalier way, and not a whimper out of him. Not a whimper!

Suddenly Howard found himself wanting to go over there to Gilgamesh, to comfort him, to let him lean his head back against him while the doctor worked him over, to wipe the sweat from his brow—

Yes, to comfort him in an open, rugged, manly way—

No. No. No. No.

There it was again, the horror, the unspeakable thing, the hideous crawling hell-borne impulse rising out of the cesspools of his soul—

Howard fought it back. Blotted it out, hid it from view. Denied that it had ever entered his mind.

To Lovecraft he said, "That's some doctor! Took his medical degree at the Chicago slaughterhouses, I reckon!"

"Don't you know who he is, Bob?"

"Some old Dutchman who wandered in here during a sandstorm and never bothered to leave."

"Does the name of Dr. Schweitzer mean nothing to you?"

Howard gave Lovecraft a blank look. "Guess I never heard it much in Texas."

"Oh, Bob, Bob, why must you always pretend to be such a cowboy? Can you tell me you've never heard of Schweitzer? *Albert* Schweitzer? The great philosopher, theologian, musician—there never was a greater interpreter of Bach, and don't tell me you don't know Bach either—"

"She-it, H.P., you talking about that old country doctor there?"

"Who founded the leprosy clinic in Africa, at Lambarene, yes. Who devoted his life to helping the sick, under the most primitive conditions, in the most remote forests of—"

"Hold on, H.P. That can't be so."

"That one man could achieve so much? I assure you, Bob, he was quite well known in our time—perhaps not in Texas, I suppose, but nevertheless—"

"No. Not that he could do all that. But that he's here. In Hell. If that old geezer's everything you say, then he's a goddamned *saint*. Unless he

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beat his wife when no one was looking, or something like that. What's a saint doing in Hell, H.P.?"

"What are *we* doing in Hell?" Lovecraft asked.

Howard reddened and looked away. "Well—I suppose, there were things in our lives—things that might be considered sins, in the strictest sense—"

"No one understands the rules of Hell, Bob," said Lovecraft gently. "Sin may have nothing to do with it. Gandhi is here, do you realize that? Confucius. Were *they* sinners? Was Moses? Abraham? We've tried to impose our own pitiful shallow beliefs, our pathetic grade-school notions of punishment for bad behavior, on this incredibly bizarre place where we find ourselves. By what right? We don't begin to comprehend what Hell really is. All we know is that it's full of heroic villains and villainous heroes—and people like you and me—and it seems that Albert Schweitzer is here, too. A great mystery. But perhaps someday—"

"Shh," Howard said. "Prester John's talking to us."

"My lords ambassador—"

Hastily they turned toward him. "Your majesty?" Howard said.

"This mission that has brought you here: your king wants an alliance, I suppose? What for? Against whom? Quarreling with some pope again, is he?"

"With his daughter, I'm afraid," said Howard.

Prester John looked bored. He toyed with his emerald scepter. "Mary, you mean?"

"Elizabeth, your majesty," Lovecraft said.

"Your king's a most quarrelsome man. I'd have thought there were enough popes in Hell to keep him busy, though, and no need to contend with his daughters."

"They are the most contentious women in Hell," Lovecraft said. "Blood of his blood, after all, and each of them a queen with a noisy, brawling kingdom of her own. Elizabeth, my lord, is sending a pack of her explorers to the Outback, and King Henry doesn't like the idea."

"Indeed," said Yeh-lu Ta-shih, suddenly interested again. "And neither do I. She has no business in the Outback. It's not her territory. The rest of Hell should be big enough for Elizabeth. What is she looking for here?"

"The sorcerer John Dee has told her that the way out of Hell is to be found in these parts."

"There is no way out of Hell."

Lovecraft smiled. "I'm not any judge of that, your majesty. Queen Elizabeth, in any event, has given credence to the notion. Her Walter Ralegh directs the expedition, and the geographer Hakluyt is with him, and a force of five hundred soldiers. They move diagonally across the Outback just to the south of your domain, following some chart that Dr.

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Dee has obtained for them. He had it from Cagliostro, they say, who bought it from Hadrian when Hadrian was still supreme commander of Hell's legions. It is allegedly an official Satanic document."

Prester John did not appear to be impressed. "Let us say, for argument's sake, that there *is* an exit from Hell. Why would Queen Elizabeth desire to leave? Hell's not so bad. It has its minor discomforts, yes, but one learns to cope with them. Does she think she'd be able to reign in Heaven as she does here—assuming there's a Heaven at all, which is distinctly not proven?"

"Elizabeth has no real interest in leaving Hell herself, majesty," Howard said. "What King Henry fears is that if she does find the way out, she'll claim it for her own and set up a colony around it, and charge a fee for passing through the gate. No matter where it takes you, the king reckons there'll be millions of people willing to risk it, and Elizabeth will wind up cornering all the money in Hell. He can't abide that notion, d'ye see? He thinks she's already too smart and aggressive by half, and he hates the idea that she might get even more powerful. There's something mixed into it having to do with Queen Elizabeth's mother, too—that was Anne Boleyn, Henry's second wife—she was a wild and wanton one, and he cut her head off for adultery, and now he thinks that Anne's behind Elizabeth's maneuvers, trying to get even with him by—"

"Spare me these details," said Ye-luh Ta-shih with some irritation. "What does Henry expect me to do?"

"Send troops to turn the Ralegh expedition back before it can find anything useful to Elizabeth."

"And in what way do I gain from this?"

"If the exit from Hell's on your frontier, your majesty, do you really want a bunch of Elizabethan Englishmen setting up a colony next door to you?"

"There is no exit from Hell," Prester John said complacently once again.

"But if they set up a colony anyway?"

Prester John was silent a moment. "I see," he said finally.

"In return for your aid," Howard said, "we're empowered to offer you a trade treaty on highly favorable terms."

"Ah."

"And a guarantee of military protection in the event of the invasion of your realm by a hostile power."

"If King Henry's armies are so mighty, why does he not deal with the Ralegh expedition himself?"

"There was no time to outfit and dispatch an army across such a great distance," said Lovecraft. "Elizabeth's people had already set out before anything was known of the scheme."

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"Ah," said Yeh-lu Ta-shih.

"Of course," Lovecraft went on, "there were other princes of the Outback that King Henry might have approached. Moammar Khadafy's name came up, and one of the Assyrians—Assurnasirpal, I think—and someone mentioned Mao Tse-tung. No, King Henry said, let us ask the aid of Prester John, for he is a monarch of great puissance and grandeur, whose writ is supreme throughout the far reaches of Hell. Prester John, indeed, that is the one whose aid we must seek!"

A strange new sparkle had come into Ye-luh Ta-shih's eyes. "You were considering an alliance with Mao Tse-tung?"

"It was merely a suggestion, your majesty."

"Ah. I see." The emperor rose from his throne. "Well, we must consider these matters more carefully, eh? We must not come hastily to a decision." He looked across the great vaulted throne room to the divan where Dr. Schweitzer still labored over Gilgamesh's wound. "Your patient, doctor—what's the report?"

"A man of steel, majesty, a man of steel! *Gott sei dank*, he heals before my eyes!"

"Indeed. Come, then. You will all want to rest, I think; and then you shall know the full hospitality of Prester John."

The full hospitality of Prester John, Gilgamesh soon discovered, was no trifling affair.

He was led off to a private chamber with walls lined with black felt—a kind of indoor tent—where three serving-girls who stood barely hip-high to him surrounded him, giggling, and took his clothing from him. Gently they pushed him into a huge marble cistern full of warm milk, where they bathed him lovingly and massaged his aching body in the most intimate manner. Afterward they robed him in intricate vestments of yellow silk.

Then they conveyed him to the emperor's great hall, where the whole court was gathered, a glittering and resplendent multitude. Some sort of concert was under way, seven solemn musicians playing harsh screeching twanging music. Gongs crashed, a trumpet blared, pipes uttered eerie piercing sounds. Servants showed Gilgamesh to a place of honor atop a pile of furry blankets heaped high with velvet cushions.

Lovecraft and Howard were already there, garbed like Gilgamesh in magnificent silks. Both of them looked somewhat unsettled—unhinged, even. Howard, flushed and boisterous, could barely sit still: he laughed and waved his arms around and kicked his heels against the furs, like a small boy who has done something very naughty and is trying to conceal it by being overexuberant. Lovecraft, on the other hand, seemed

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dazed and dislocated, with the glassy-eyed look of someone who has recently been clubbed.

These are two very odd men indeed, Gilgamesh thought.

One works hard at being loud and lusty, and now and then gives you a glimpse of a soul boiling with wild fantasies of swinging swords and rivers of blood. But in reality he seems terrified of everything. The other, though he is weirdly remote and austere, is apparently not quite as crazy, but he too gives the impression of being at war with himself, in terror of allowing any sort of real human feeling to break through the elaborate façade of his mannerisms. The poor fools must have been scared silly when the serving-girls started stripping them and pouring warm milk over them and stroking their bodies. No doubt they haven't recovered yet from all that nasty pleasure, Gilgamesh thought. He could imagine their cries of horror as the little Mongol girls started going to work on them. *What are you* doing? *Leave my trousers alone! Don't touch me there! Please—no—ooh—ah—*ooh! *Oooh!*

Yeh-lu Ta-shih, seated upon a high throne of ivory and onyx, waved grandly to him, one great king to another. Gilgamesh gave him an almost imperceptible nod by way of acknowledgment. All this pomp and formality bored him hideously. He had endured so much of it in his former life, after all. And then *he* had been the one on the high throne, but even then it had been nothing but a bore. And now—

But this was no more boring than anything else. Gilgamesh had long ago decided that that was the true curse of Hell: all striving was meaningless here, mere thunder without the lightning. And there was no end to it. You might die again now and then if you were careless or unlucky, but back you came for another turn, sooner or later, at the Undertaker's whim. There was no release from the everlastingness of it all. Once he had yearned desperately for eternal life, and he had learned that he could not have such a thing, at least not in the world of mortal men. But now indeed he had come to a place where he would live forever, so it seemed, and yet there was no joy in it. His fondest dream now was simply to serve his time in Hell and be allowed to sleep in peace forever. He saw no way of attaining that. Life here just went on and on—very much like this concert, this endless skein of twangs and plinks and screeches.

Someone with the soft face of a eunuch came by and offered him a morsel of grilled meat. Gilgamesh knew he would pay for it later—you always did, when you ate something in Hell—but he was hungry now, and he gobbled it. And another, and another, and a flagon of fermented mare's milk besides.

A corps of dancers appeared, men and women in flaring filmy robes. They were doing things with swords and flaming torches. A second eunuch brought Gilgamesh a tray of mysterious sugary delicacies, and he

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helped himself with both hands, heedless of the consequences. He was ravenous. His body, as it healed, was calling furiously for fuel. Beside him, the man Howard was swilling down the mare's milk as if it were water and getting tipsier and tipsier, and the other, the one called Lovecraft, sat morosely staring at the dancers without touching a thing. He seemed to be shivering as though in the midst of a snowstorm.

Gilgamesh beckoned for a second flagon. Just then the doctor arrived and settled down cheerfully on the heap of blankets next to him. Schweitzer grinned his approval as Gilgamesh took a hearty drink. "*Fuhlen Sie sich besser, mein Held, eh?* The arm, it no longer gives you pain? Already the wound is closing. So quickly you repair yourself! Such strength, such power of healing! You are God's own miracle, dear Gilgamesh. The blessing of the Almighty is upon you." He seized a flagon of his own from a passing servant, quaffed it, made a face. "*Ach,* this milk-wine of theirs! And *ach, ach,* this *verfluchte* music! What I would give for the taste of decent Moselle on my tongue now, eh, and the sound of the D minor toccata and fugue in my ears! Bach—do you know him?"

"Who?"

"Bach! Bach, Johann Sebastian Bach. The greatest of musicians, God's own poet in sound. I saw him once, just once, years ago." Schweitzer's eyes were glowing. "I was new here. Not two weeks had I been here. It was at the villa of King Friedrich—Frederick the Great, you know him? No? The king of Prussia? *Der alte Fritz*? No matter. No matter. *Es macht nichts.* A man entered, ordinary, you would never notice him in a crowd, yes? And began to play the harpsichord, and he had not played three measures when I said, This is Bach, this must be the actual Bach, and I would have dropped down on my knees before him but that I was ashamed. And it was he. I said to myself, Why is it that Bach is in Hell? But then I said, as perhaps you have said, as I think everyone here must say at one time or another, Why is it that *Schweitzer* is in Hell? And I knew that it is that God is mysterious. Perhaps I was sent here to minister to the damned. Perhaps it is that Bach was also. Or perhaps we are damned also; or perhaps no one here is damned. *Es macht nichts aus,* all this speculation. It is a mistake, or even *vielleicht* a sin, to imagine that we can comprehend the workings of the mind of God. We are here. We have our tasks. That is enough for us to know."

"I felt that way once," said Gilgamesh. "When I was king in Uruk, and finally came to understand that I must die, that there was no hiding from that. What is the purpose, then, I asked myself? And I told myself: The gods have put us here to perform our tasks, and that is the purpose. And so I lived thereafter, and so I died." Gilgamesh's face darkened. "But here—here—"

"Here too we have our tasks," Schweitzer said.

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"You do, perhaps. For me there is only the task of passing the time. I had a friend to bear the burden with me, once—"

"Enkidu."

Gilgamesh seized the doctor's sturdy wrist with sudden fierce intensity. "You know of Enkidu?"

"From the poem, yes. The poem is very famous."

"Ah. Ah. The poem. But the actual man—"

"I know nothing of him, *nein*."

"He is of my stature, very large. His beard is thick, his hair is shaggy, his shoulders are wider even than mine. We journeyed everywhere together. But then we quarreled, and he went from me in anger, saying, Never cross my path again. Saying, I have no love for you, Gilgamesh. Saying, If we meet again I will have your life. And I have heard nothing of him since."

Schweitzer turned and stared closely at Gilgamesh. "How is this possible? All the world knows the love of Enkidu for Gilgamesh!"

Gilgamesh called for yet another flagon. This conversation was awakening an ache within his breast, an ache that made the pain that his wound had caused seem like nothing more than an itch. Nor would the drink soothe it; but he would drink all the same.

He took a deep draught and said somberly, "We quarreled. There were hot words between us. He said he had no love for me any longer."

"This cannot be true."

Gilgamesh shrugged and made no reply.

"You wish to find him again?" Schweitzer asked.

"I desire nothing else."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Hell is larger even than the world. He could be anywhere."

"You will find him."

"If you knew how I have searched for him—"

"You will find him. That I know."

Gilgamesh shook his head. "If Hell is a place of torment, then this is mine, that I will never find him again. Or if I do, that he will spurn me. Or raise his hand against me."

"This is not so," said Schweitzer. "I think he longs for you even as you do for him."

"Then why does he keep himself from me?"

"This is Hell," said Schweitzer gently. "You are being tested, my friend; but no test lasts forever. Not even in Hell. Not even in Hell. Even though you are in Hell, have faith in the Lord: You will have your Enkidu soon enough, *um Himmels Willen*." Smiling, Schweitzer said, "The emperor is calling you. Go to him. I think he has something to tell you that you will want to hear."

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* * *

Prester John said, "You are a warrior, are you not?"

"I was," replied Gilgamesh indifferently.

"A general? A leader of men?"

"All that is far behind me," Gilgamesh said. "This is the life after life. Now I go my own way and I take on no tasks for others. Hell has plenty of generals."

"I am told that you were a leader among leaders. I am told that you fought like the god of war. When you took the field, whole nations laid down their arms and knelt before you."

Gilgamesh waited, saying nothing.

"You miss the glory of the battlefield, don't you, Gilgamesh?"

"Do I?"

"What if I were to offer you the command of my army?"

"Why would you do that? What am I to you? What is your nation to me?"

"In Hell we take whatever citizenship we wish. What would you say, if I offered you the command?"

"I would tell you that you are making a great mistake."

"It isn't a trivial army. Ten thousand men. Adequate air support. Tactical nukes. The strongest firepower in the Outback."

"You misunderstand," said Gilgamesh. "Warfare doesn't interest me. I know nothing of modern weapons and don't care to learn. You have the wrong man, Prester John. If you need a general, send for Wellington. Send for Marlborough. Rommel. Tiglath-Pileser."

"Or for Enkidu?"

The unexpected name hit Gilgamesh like a battering ram. At the sound of it his face grew hot and his entire body trembled convulsively.

"What do you know about Enkidu?"

Prester John held up one superbly manicured hand. "Allow me the privilege of asking the questions, great king."

"You spoke the name of Enkidu. What do you know about Enkidu?"

"First let us discuss other matters which are of—"

"Enkidu," said Gilgamesh implacably. "Why did you mention his name?"

"I know that he was your friend—"

"*Is.*"

"Very well, *is* your friend. And a man of great valor and strength. Who happens to be a guest at this very moment at the court of the great enemy of my realm. And who, so I understand it, is preparing just now to make war against me."

"*What?*" Gilgamesh stared. "Enkidu is in the service of Queen Elizabeth?"

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"I don't recall having said that."

"Is it not Queen Elizabeth who even now has sent an army to encroach on your domain?"

Yeh-lu Ta-shih laughed. "Ralegh and his five hundred fools? That expedition's an absurdity. I'll take care of them in an afternoon. I mean another enemy altogether. Tell me this: do you know of Mao Tse-tung?"

"These princes of the New Dead—there are so many names—"

"A Chinese, a man of Han. Emperor of the Marxist Dynasty, long after my time. Crafty, stubborn, tough. More than a little crazy. He runs something called the Celestial People's Republic, just north of here. What he tells his subjects is that we can turn Hell into Heaven by collectivizing it."

"Collectivizing?" said Gilgamesh uncomprehendingly.

"To make all the peasants into kings, and the kings into peasants. As I say: more than a little crazy. But he has his hordes of loyal followers, and they do whatever he says. He means to conquer all the Outback, beginning right here. And after that, have all of Hell subjected to his lunatic ideas. I fear that Elizabeth's in league with him—that this nonsense of looking for a way out of Hell is only a ruse, that in fact her Ralegh is spying out my weaknesses for her so that she can sell the information to Mao."

"But if this Mao is the enemy of all kings, why would Elizabeth ally herself with—"

"Obviously they mean to use each other. Elizabeth aiding Mao to overthrow me, Mao aiding Elizabeth to push her father from his throne. And then afterward, who knows? But I mean to strike before either of them can harm me."

"What about Enkidu?" Gilgamesh said. "Tell me about Enkidu."

Prester John opened a scroll of computer printout. Skimming through it, he read, "The Old Dead warrior Enkidu of Sumer—Sumer, that's your nation, isn't it?—arrived at court of Mao Tse-tung on such-and-such a date—ostensible purpose of visit, Outback hunting expedition— accompanied by American spy posing as journalist and hunter, one E. Hemingway—secret meetings with Kublai Khan, Minister of War for the Celestial People's Republic—now training Communist troops in preparation for invasion of New Kara-Khitai—" The emperor looked up. "Is this of interest to you, Gilgamesh?"

"What is it you want from me?"

"This man is your famous friend. You know his mind as you do your own. Defend us from him and I'll give you anything you desire."

"What I desire," said Gilgamesh, "is nothing more than the friendship of Enkidu."

"Then I'll give you Enkidu on a silver platter. Take the field for me

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against Mao's troops. Help me anticipate whatever strategies your Enkidu has been teaching them. We'll wipe the Marxist bastards out and capture their generals, and then Enkidu will be yours. I can't guarantee that he'll want to be your friend again, but he'll be yours. What do you say, Gilgamesh? What do you say?"

Across the gray plains of Hell from horizon to horizon sprawled the legions of Prester John. Scarlet-and-yellow banners fluttered against the somber sky. At the center of the formation stood a wedge of horseborne archers in leather armor; on each flank was a detachment of heavy infantry; the emperor's fleet of tanks was in the vanguard, rolling unhurriedly forward over the rough, broken terrain. A phalanx of transatmospheric weapons-platforms provided air cover far overhead.

A cloud of dust in the distance gave evidence of the oncoming army of the Celestial People's Republic.

"By all the demons of Stygia, did you ever see such a cockeyed sight?" Robert Howard cried. He and Lovecraft had a choice view of the action from their place in the imperial command post, a splendid pagoda protected by a glowing force-shield. Gilgamesh was there too, just across the way with Prester John and the officers of the Kara-Khitai high command. The emperor was peering into a bank of television monitors and one of his aides was feverishly tapping out orders on a computer terminal. "Makes no goddamned sense," said Howard. "Horsemen, tanks, weapons-platforms, all mixing it up at the same time—is that how these wild sons of bitches fight a war?"

Lovecraft touched his forefinger to his lips. "Don't shout so, Bob. Do you want Prester John to hear you? We're his guests, remember. And King Henry's ambassadors."

"Well, if he hears me, he hears me. Look at that crazy mess! Doesn't Prester John realize that he's got a twentieth-century Bolshevik Chinaman coming to attack him with twentieth-century weapons? What good are mounted horsemen, for God's sake? A cavalry charge into the face of heavy artillery? Bows and arrows against howitzers?" Howard guffawed. "Nuclear-tipped arrows, is that the trick?"

Softly Lovecraft said, "For all we know, that's what they are."

"You know that can't be. H.P., I'm surprised at you, a man with your scientific background. I know all this nuke stuff is after our time, but surely you've kept up with the theory. Critical mass at the tip of an arrow? No, H.P., you know as well as I do that it just can't work. And even if it could—"

In exasperation Lovecraft waved him to be silent. He pointed across the room to the main monitor in front of Prester John. The florid face of a heavy-set man with a thick white beard had appeared on the screen.

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"Isn't that Hemingway?" Lovecraft asked.

"Who?"

"Ernest Hemingway. The writer. *A Farewell to Arms. The Sun Also Rises.*"

"Never could stand his stuff," said Howard. "Sick crap about a bunch of drunken weaklings. You sure that's him?"

"Weaklings, Bob?" said Lovecraft in astonishment.

"I read only the one book, about those Americans in Europe who go to the bullfights and get drunk and fool around with each other's women, and that was all of Mr. Hemingway that I cared to experience. I tell you, H.P., it disgusted me. And the way it was written! All those short little sentences—no magic, no poetry, H.P.—"

"Let's talk about it some other time, Bob."

"No vision of heroism—no awareness of the higher passions that ennoble and—"

"Bob—please—"

"A fixation on the sordid, the slimy, the depraved—"

"You're being absurd, Bob. You're completely misinterpreting his philosophy of life. If you had simply taken the trouble to read *A Farewell to Arms*—" Lovecraft shook his head angrily. "This is no time for a literary discussion. Look—look there." He nodded toward the far side of the room. "One of the emperor's aides is calling us over. Something's going on."

Indeed there had been a development of some sort. Yeh-lu Ta-shih seemed to be conferring with four or five aides at once. Gilgamesh, red-faced, agitated, was striding swiftly back and forth in front of the computer bank. Hemingway's face was still on the screen and he too looked agitated.

Hastily Howard and Lovecraft crossed the room. The emperor turned to them. "There's been a request for a parley in the field," Prester John said. "Kublai Khan is on his way over. Dr. Schweitzer will serve as my negotiator. The man Hemingway's going to be an impartial observer—*their* impartial observer. I need an impartial observer too. Will you two go down there too, as diplomats from a neutral power, to keep an eye on things?"

"An honor to serve," said Howard grandly.

"And for what purpose, my lord, has the parley been called?" Lovecraft asked.

Yeh-lu Ta-shih gestured toward the screen. "Hemingway has had the notion that we can settle this thing by single combat—Gilgamesh versus Enkidu. Save on ammunition, spare the Undertaker a devil of a lot of toil. But there's a disagreement over the details." Delicately he smothered a yawn. "Perhaps it can all be worked out by lunchtime."

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It was an oddly assorted group. Mao Tse-tung's chief negotiator was the plump, magnificently dressed Kublai Khan, whose dark sly eyes gave evidence of much cunning and force. He had been an emperor in his own right in his former life, but evidently had preferred less taxing responsibilities here. Next to him was Hemingway, big and heavy, with a deep voice and an easy, almost arrogant manner. Mao had also sent four small men in identical blue uniforms with red stars on their breasts—"Party types," someone murmured—and, strangely, a Hairy Man, big-browed and chinless, one of those creatures out of deepest antiquity. He too wore the Communist emblem on his uniform.

And there was one more to the group—the massive, deep-chested man of dark brow and fierce and smouldering eyes, who stood off by himself at the far side—

Gilgamesh could barely bring himself to look at him. He too stood apart from the group a little way, savoring the keen edge of the wind that blew across the field of battle. He longed to rush toward Enkidu, to throw his arms around him, to sweep away in one jubilant embrace all the bitterness that had separated them—

If only it could be as simple as that!

The voices of Mao's negotiators and the five that Prester John had sent—Schweitzer, Lovecraft, Howard, and a pair of Kara-Khitai officers—drifted to Gilgamesh above the howling of the wind.

Hemingway seemed to be doing most of the talking. "Writers, are you? Mr. Howard, Mr. Lovecraft? I regret I haven't had the pleasure of encountering your work."

"Fantasy, it was," said Lovecraft. "Fables. Visions."

"That so? You publish in *Argosy*? The *Post*?"

"Five to *Argosy*, but they were westerns," Howard said. "Mainly we wrote for *Weird Tales*. And H.P., a few in *Astounding Stories*."

"*Weird Tales*," Hemingway said. "*Astounding Stories*." A shadow of distaste flickered across his face. "Mmm. Don't think I knew those magazines. But you wrote well, did you, gentlemen? You set down what you truly felt, the real thing, and you stated it purely? Of course you did. I know you did. You were honest writers or you'd never have gone to Hell. That goes almost without saying." He laughed, rubbed his hands in glee, effusively threw his arms around the shoulders of Howard and Lovecraft. Howard seemed alarmed by that and Lovecraft looked as though he wanted to sink into the ground. "Well, gentlemen," Hemingway boomed, "what shall we do here? We have a little problem. The one hero wishes to fight with bare hands, the other with—what did he call it?—a disruptor pistol? You would know more about that than I do: something out of *Astounding Stories*, is how it sounds to me. But we can't have this, can

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we? Bare hands against fantastic future science? There is a good way to fight and that is equal to equal, and all other ways are the bad ways."

"Let him come to me with his fists," Gilgamesh called from the distance. "As we fought the first time, in the Market-of-the-Land, when my path crossed his in Uruk."

"He is afraid to use the new weapons," Enkidu replied.

"*Afraid?*"

"I brought a shotgun to him, a fine 12-gauge weapon, a gift to my brother Gilgamesh. He shrank from it as though I had given him a venomous serpent."

"Lies!" roared Gilgamesh. "I had no fear of it! I despised it because it was cowardly!"

"He fears anything which is new," said Enkidu. "I never thought Gilgamesh of Uruk would know fear, but he fears the unfamiliar. He called me a coward, because I would hunt with a shotgun. But I think he was the coward. And now he fears to fight me with the unfamiliar. He knows that I'll slay him. He fears death even here, do you know that? Death has always been his great terror. Why is that? Because it is an insult to his pride? I think that is it. Too proud to die—too proud to accept the decree of the gods—"

"I will break you with my hands alone!" Gilgamesh bellowed.

"Give us disruptors," said Enkidu. "Let us see if he dares to touch such a weapon."

"A coward's weapon!"

"Again you call me a coward? You, Gilgamesh, you are the one who quivers in fear—"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!"

"You fear my strength, Enkidu!"

"You fear my skill. You with your pathetic old sword, your pitiful bow—"

"Is this the Enkidu I loved, mocking me so?"

"You were the first to mock, when you threw back the shotgun into my hands, spurning my gift, calling me a coward—"

"The weapon, I said, was cowardly. Not you, Enkidu."

"It was the same thing."

"*Bitte, bitte,*" said Schweitzer. "This is not the way!"

And again from Hemingway: "Gentlemen, please!"

They took no notice.

"I meant—"

"You said—"

"Shame—"

"Fear—"

"Three times over a coward!"

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"Five times five a traitor!"

"False friend!"

"Vain braggart!"

"Gentlemen, I have to ask you—"

But Hemingway's voice, loud and firm though it was, was altogether drowned out by the roar of rage that came from the throat of Gilgamesh. Dizzying throbs of anger pounded in his breast, his throat, his temples. He could take no more. This was how it had begun the first time, when Enkidu had come to him with that shotgun and he had given it back and they had fallen into dispute. At first merely a disagreement, and then a hot debate, and then a quarrel, and then the hurling of bitter accusations. And then such words of anger as had never passed between them before, they who had been closer than brothers.

That time they hadn't come to blows. Enkidu had simply stalked away, declaring that their friendship was at an end. But now—hearing all the same words again—stymied by this quarrel even over the very method by which they were to fight—Gilgamesh could no longer restrain himself. Overmastered by fury and frustration, he rushed forward.

Enkidu, eyes gleaming, was ready for him.

Hemingway attempted to come between them. Big as he was, he was like a child next to Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and they swatted him to one side without effort. With a jolt that made the ground itself reverberate, Gilgamesh went crashing into Enkidu and laid hold of him with both hands.

Enkidu laughed. "So you have your way after all, King Gilgamesh! Bare hands it is!"

"It is the only way," said Gilgamesh.

At last. At last. There was no wrestler in this world or the other who could contend with Gilgamesh of Uruk. I will break him, Gilgamesh thought, as he broke our friendship. I will snap his spine. I will crush his chest.

As once they had done long ago, they fought like maddened bulls. They stared eye to eye as they contended. They grunted; they bellowed; they roared. Gilgamesh shouted out defiance in the language of Uruk and in any other language he could think of; and Enkidu muttered and stormed at Gilgamesh in the language of the beasts that once he had spoken when he was a wild man, the harsh growling of the lion of the plains.

Gilgamesh yearned to have Enkidu's life. He loved this man more dearly than life itself, and yet he prayed that it would be given him to break Enkidu's back, to hear the sharp snapping sound of his spine, to toss him aside like a worn-out cloak. So strong was his love that it had turned to the brightest of hatreds. I will send him to the Undertaker once again, Gilgamesh thought. I will hurl him from Hell.

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But though he struggled as he had never struggled in combat before, Gilgamesh was unable to budge Enkidu. Veins bulged in his forehead; the sutures that held his wound burst and blood flowed down his arm; and still he strained to throw Enkidu to the ground, and still Enkidu held his place. And matched him, strength for strength, and kept him at bay. They stood locked that way a long moment, staring into each other's eyes, locked in unbreakable stalement.

Then after a long while Enkidu said, as once he had said long ago, "Ah, Gilgamesh! There is not another one like you in all the world! Glory to the mother who bore you!"

It was like the breaking of a dam, and a rush of life-giving waters tumbling out over the summer-parched fields of the Land.

And from Gilgamesh in that moment of release and relief came twice-spoken words also:

"There is one other who is like me. But only one."

"No, for Enlil has given you the kingship."

"But you are my brother," said Gilgamesh, and they laughed and let go of each other and stepped back, as if seeing each other for the first time, and laughed again.

"This is great foolishness, this fighting between us," Enkidu cried.

"Very great foolishness indeed, brother."

"What need have you of shotguns and disruptors?"

"And what do I care if you choose to play with such toys?"

"Indeed, brother."

"Indeed!"

Gilgamesh looked around. They were all staring—the four party men, Lovecraft, Howard, the Hairy Man, Kublai Khan, Hemingway, all astonished, mouths drooping open. Only Schweitzer was beaming. The doctor came up to them and said quietly, "You have not injured each other? No. *Gut. Gut.* Then leave here, the two of you, together. Now. What do you care for Prester John and his wars, or for Mao and his? This is no business of yours. Go. Now."

Enkidu grinned. "What do you say, brother? Shall we go off hunting together?"

"To the end of the Outback, and back again. You and I, and no one else."

"And we will hunt only with our bows and spears?"

Gilgamesh shrugged. "With disruptors, if that is how you would have it. With cannons. With nuke grenades. Ah, Enkidu, Enkidu—!"

"Gilgamesh!"

"Go," Schweitzer whispered. "Now. Leave this place and never look back. *Auf Wiedersehen! Gluckliche Reise! Gottes Name,* go now!"

* * *

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Watching them take their leave, seeing them trudge off together into the swirling winds of the Outback, Robert Howard felt a sudden sharp pang of regret and loss. How beautiful they had been, those two heroes, those two giants, as they strained and struggled! And then that sudden magic moment when the folly of their quarrel came home to them, when they were enemies no longer and brothers once more—

And now they were gone, and here he stood amidst these others, these strangers—

He had wanted to be Gilgamesh's brother, or perhaps—he barely comprehended it—something more than a brother. But that could never have been. And, knowing that it could never have been, knowing that that man who seemed so much like his Conan was lost to him forever, Howard felt tears beginning to surge within him.

"Bob?" Lovecraft said. "Bob, are you all right?"

She-it, Howard thought. *A man don't cry. Especially in front of other men.*

He turned away, into the wind, so Lovecraft could not see his face.

"Bob? Bob?"

She-it, Howard thought again. And he let the tears come. ●

THE DREAMING MACHINE DREAMS OF A LIFE AFTER DEATH

One last signal
escapes, one last beat.
A child learns to read
on this last impulse,
an old man recalls puberty.
The last signal winds through
machine after machine, a whisper
the error-trappers chase,
the power-chasers track,
but the last signal becomes
immortal, winding the world
like a winding sheet.

—Steve Rasnic Tem

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(from page 95)

SECOND SOLUTION TO THE VANISHING PLANK

Here is how the Great Aleph proved that the plank, although horrendously mutilated, was still there. He simply placed on top of it a piece of plank slightly longer than ¼ of the original. Keeping it horizontal, he slid it back and forth across the invisible plank, from one end to the other. It did not fall through because every gap left by the infinite operation of slicing was shorter than ¼.

The Great Aleph concluded the illusion by pressing his palms against the ends of the invisible plank, then moving them inward. This pushed all the points together, forming in midair a plank half the size of the original. To prove it solid, the Great Aleph snapped it in half with a quick karate chop, after which he bowed to thunderous applause from all the creatures in the audience who had hands.

The fantastic plank trick derives from a famous infinite set first described by Cantor, and known as the "Cantor discontinuum." In Cantor's version, at each step the segments of a line of length 1 are trisected and the central third removed. It is easy to show that at the limit the sum of the removed sections is 1, yet an infinite set of points remains. Although the remaining points form what is called an "uncountable set" (the number of such a set is aleph-one), between every two of these points there is a gap. Nevertheless, you cannot draw a circle anywhere on the mutilated line that will not contain an uncountable infinity of points!

You'll find a good discussion of Cantor's mind-boggling discontinuum in *What is Mathematics?*, a classic work by Richard Courant and Herbert Robbins. I based my description of the Great Aleph's illusion on "Cantor's Disappearing Table," an article by Larry E. Knop that appeared in *The College Mathematics Journal*, November 1985.

For the final solution to last month's puzzle, please turn to page 191

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By Ian Watson
DAW Books, $2.95 (paper)

East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet is the rule on Yaleen's world, the habitable portions of which seem to be confined to the banks of a wide and long river. It is reminiscent of the Nile, running south to north from stratosphere-high cliffs to the sea and bordered by impassable deserts. Yaleen's people live on the eastern bank, and they know absolutely nothing about the inhabitants of the western bank, since down the middle of the river for its entire length flows the "black current." This is a thin black flow of gelid material which no one has been known to cross. These who have attempted have gone mad and have been swallowed up by it.

The story is told by Yaleen, whose east-bank society is a placid matriarchy (women are allowed more leeway on the river by the black current), structureless just short of anarchical, with some low-grade technology and a lot of river-borne trade between the communities on its considerable length. The reader learns a good deal about Yaleen's culture as she travels the stream as a riverwoman. But then, during a New Year's ceremony, Yaleen is taken by the black current and tossed up on the unknown west bank. The people there avoid the river, live as far inland as possible, and are about as different from the east-bankers as can be: patriarchal and highly organized, though less accomplished culturally. They also have some odd ideas about the black current—such as that it is a single creature—and of their race's origin, another world, Eeden, where they have been constructed to live on this one.

The last part of the novel tears along at breakneck pace, as Yaleen makes it back to the east bank and the west-bankers find a way to force the black current (which is indeed a single organism) to retreat to the southern end of the river. They then invade the opposite shore. Yaleen saves the day by entering the huge creature that was the black current, and finding out from it the answers to most of the mysteries of her world. Not all of them; this is the first book of a trilogy and it seems that the black-current creature is a sort of God, and wants to take on the guiding intelligence of the world Eeden, which initially populated its world.

This could be a sort of arbitrary

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metaphysical mishmosh; what saves it is Yaleen's view of all that's happening, which is commonsensical and humorous, and leads one to look forward to her further adventures, to be published later this year. (The second volume, *The Book of the Stars*, should be available by the time this sees print.)

Incidentally, the English paperback of *The Book of the River* has a stunning cover, a riverscape with boat and the huge cliffs of the south climbing up behind the title, all in breathtaking Maxfield Parrish/Hannes Bok colors. (It's by Mike Van Houten.) The American edition has a lady with minimal clothing and a distressed expression riding a large red fish, whose visage can only be described as ill-tempered. Publishers will tell us that the latter sort of cover will sell more copies than the former. This may well be true, but it leaves those of us with some taste and who like to believe we're reading more or less adult literature in a bind.

The Cross-Time Engineer
By Leo A. Frankowski
Del Rey, $2.95 (paper)

The title's all wrong.

The writing's not stylish.

The idea's not new.

There's a *deus ex machina* to end all *deus ex machinas*.

It's the first volume of a tetralogy.

So why did I enjoy this book so much?

Leo A. Frankowski's *The Cross-Time Engineer* is a contemporary Pole, a good socialist, and, yes, an engineer, who through no fault of his own, gets stuck in rural thirteenth-century Poland. (Well, the fault may have been in getting drunk, but there were reasons.) He doesn't realize this until he's well away from the inn where the glitch in time took place (it's a sort of transhipment station for time cargos). By the time he *does* realize it, he's in the middle of a blizzard in the middle of nowhere. He falls in with a kindly priest who is on his way from Rome to Cracow and is employed as a bodyguard (for his stature; at 190 centimeters he towers over everyone in the past) by a merchant. He has a few dustups with miscreant knights and robbers, and is finally hired away from the merchant by a progressive feudal Count who likes his ideas (not to mention the zippers in his backpack) and the way he plays chess. He swears fealty to the Count, and proceeds to remake the Count's estate, as well as "inventing" steel, knitting, and the polka. And all of this with the sure knowledge that the Mongols are going to invade and lay waste to Poland in just ten years.

The *deus ex machinas* come in because the mysterious time travelers (definitely human, but unexplained in any detail) who have caused the problem, are aware of his plight and while unable to return him to his own time, keep an eye on his doings and supply what help they can. This includes a horse

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from the future with an I.Q. of sixty, who understands Polish. She's one of the better characters in the book.

As I've noted before, the backwards-in-time novel may be the hardest subgenre of science fiction to write; the author needs the knowledge of history to fill in a convincing background, as well as the science fictional speculative talent to create an interesting interface between the past and the present. Frankowski scores high on both aspects. He sure knows a lot about thirteenth-century Poland, or, if he doesn't, he managed to convince me anyway. And while the novel's writing, plotting, and characters are straightforward and unsubtle, the author's handling of the clash between our hero's twentieth-century mores and those of the past is presented with a good deal of thought behind them. (His attitude toward killing people, for instance, is baffling to the temporal locals.)

Probably the best aspect of the book, though, is a very basic one, dating as far back as *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, et al. It's the eternally satisfying device of the resourceful person stranded in an inhospitable environment and making something out of it. Frankowski brings this off beautifully.

Oh, yes, the title. This is a quibble, but science-fictional usage has established "cross time" as a term applying to traveling between alternate time tracks, *across* time, as it were. *The Back-Time Engineer* doesn't sound very good; *The Down-Time Engineer*, maybe?

The Long Mynd
By Edward P. Hughes
Baen, $2.95 (paper)

You're not gonna believe this.

I sure didn't.

Thirty years after the bombs have fallen, mankind potters along with relatively few changes, according to *The Long Mynd* by Edward P. Hughes. This applies to the British Isles, at least; the state of the rest of the world is more or less ignored in the novel. True, the inhabitants of Wales are reduced to sheep farming and the rule of local lords, but they seem to have a placidly pastoral existence. As for fallout and other such residual matters, the hero dismisses it with "Maybe a sprinkle of the fallout stuff blew over now and again, but, if you could not see it, taste it, nor smell it—how could you tell?"

But in London the rich still have martinis at their clubs, and the large population has its lowlife and nine-to-fivers. Physically, though, the city is a bit different. The market is held in a replica of the old Crystal Palace, and the place is ruled from a tower of black glass by "the Owner."

This urban renewal has been made possible by something called "charming," which is a talent that has appeared among the population since the bombs. It is the ability to make something out of nothing; the rules seem a bit vague, but for one thing, nothing of

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biological origin can be created, which is why what currency there is is made from ivory and silk. (However, at one point someone does "charm" a silk bill into existence, so even that is open to question.)

Charmers are not popular out in the boonies, being generally subject to captivity, beheading, dehanding, blinding and other manifestations of prejudice. Our hero, one Dafydd Madoc Llewelyn (from Wales, if you have to ask), is a closet charmer, and hies himself to London where he hears that charmers are welcome. They are, in a way, but theirs is a sort of gilded cage existence, subject to lots of rules and regulations, and Dafydd (is the diminutive Daffy, one wonders?) doesn't like *that* much either. He samples the high life and the low life, goes off on a flying machine (balloon style) to Ireland to rescue a female charmer, gets captured by a pirate warlord, and comes back to London just in time to escape a nuclear blast which destroys the city, engineered by a disgruntled charmer.

If this doesn't sound all that clear, it isn't. A lot of the proceedings don't make too much sense. This is accounted for to a degree at the end, when it seems that Daffy—sorry, Dafydd—has been subjected to a large-scaled scam by "the Owner" in order to procure his services, because Dafydd is something special—a *de*charmer. But after over three hundred pages of confusion, having all the questions answered in the middle of a nuclear blast doesn't help much. There is also the fact that Dafydd is not the most engaging character in the world, doing nothing but bitch about his fellow characters and the circumstances in which he finds himself. Before too long, you find yourself wishing he'd go back to Wales and get himself beheaded.

Not to mention that this vaguely lighthearted look at a near post-nuclear age might just seem vaguely obscene to those who are scared to death of the probabilities of the future. (Presumably there are those who aren't.)

But the bottom line is that one of the skills (and obligations) of the science fiction (and fantasy) writer is to make the reader believe the unbelievable. I didn't believe a word of *The Long Mynd*.

The Hill of Dreams
By Arthur Machen
Dover, $4.95 (paper)

Arthur Machen, most of whose stories were published in the early part of this century, is one of those tributaries to the great tradition of British fantasy that made contemporary fantasy what it is today. Though he is widely regarded as a writer of horror stories, this is not exactly accurate. Certainly his tales are dark and often very frightening, but he didn't write of vampires or ghosts, per se. The fantasy elements in "The Great God Pan," "The Novel of the White Powder," and others are of malefic influences from the Roman, Celtic, or prehis-

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toric past of Britain; the influence, direct or indirect, can be seen in many subsequent writers (the barrow wight scene in *Lord of the Rings*, for instance).

His novel, *The Hill of Dreams*, has just been republished; I'm not all that sure of its publishing history, but it's certainly been unavailable for many years. This is probably the first paperback edition in the U.S., maybe the first U.S. edition of any kind. It's not really a fantasy, but it has so many fantasy elements in it that it should be of interest to anyone concerned with the history of the genre (or with fine writing, for that matter; what a stylist he was!). Essentially it's a semi-autobiographical novel, the story of a poor boy from the country, son of a destitute clergyman. The boy is a dreamer, and much of the novel is devoted to the effect on his imaginings of the mythology of early Britain, triggered by the Roman fort and the deep woods of the countryside. Most of these are nightmarish, and the hallucinogenic atmosphere continues as he moves to London to make his way as a writer. The ending is a shocker, even today.

Lucien, the protagonist, is a loner, despised and ostracized by the country gentry for his intelligence and poverty ("... he pretends to know a lot about books, but I heard him say the other day he's never read *Ben-Hur*."). Machen obviously was getting in his licks: English society, both rural and urban, poor and rich, is depicted as consisting of Philistines and/or monsters (there's a section to do with some street urchins and a dog that the animal-loving reader will not be able to take; I skipped it myself this time). There's also a strong element of eroticism, hardly overt by today's standards but not exactly what we're used to from even late Victorian literature.

Machen was, of course, a great influence on Lovecraft (unfortunately, more in concept than in writing technique). *The Hill of Dreams* is not for your contemporary reader devoted to cutesy fantasies, but, again, for those who are interested in the pattern of the genre, the curious webs that run back through Machen to Wilde and Dunsany, forward to HPL and Tolkien, it's a must. And, incidentally, if I may be so bold from my genre pigeonhole, a great piece of literature as well.

Variety's Complete Science Fiction Reviews
Edited by Donald Willis
Garland, $27.95 (hard-cover), $17.95 (paper)

Books on science fiction film come and go—guides to, scholarly works on, and big picture books. The guides are often handy for late night viewing; the scholarly works are sometimes interesting when they're not by media maniacs convinced that Roger Corman is the greatest of all filmmakers or that *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* has deep inner meanings; the picture books are ... picture books.

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But not too many of them stand out.

However, *Variety's Complete Science Fiction Reviews*, edited by Donald Willis, is one that does. *Variety*, if you don't know, is the venerable trade journal of show business. It's known for its punchy, slangy prose, and the reviews are from a strictly commercial angle. "Will it sell?" is the standard for film reviews, which are aimed at and written for theater owners. Nevertheless, they are sharp, usually literate in a slangy sort of way, and contain all sort of valuable information (including complete credits).

So this collection of reviews of SF films is both invaluable for research, and rather good reading. The first entry is from 1907, for a little opus entitled *Liquid Electricity* (early movies leaned heavily on science-fictional subjects of the crazy invention sort in order to show off the primitive special effects of the day—*plus ça change* . . .). There are over a thousand reviews all together, many of them of fascinating forgotten features (fascinating to read about, but probably forgotten for a reason), so it also serves as a good guide for late night viewing.

It's also great fun to see just how wrongheaded the reviewers could be at times: *Village of the Damned* is "sick," "a moderate filler for undiscriminating audiences"; *The Incredible Shrinking Man* "isn't a thoroughly satisfactory chiller"; the prolog (sic) to *2001* is dull, the ape makeup "amateurish compared to that of *Planet of the Apes*," and "a computer named Hal that can talk is, initially, good for a laugh."

It's easy enough to poke fun with hindsight. Predicting a classic is not all that easy, as any reviewer knows, and sometimes *Variety*'s writers were surprisingly *right*-headed. *THX 1138* has "nixed b.o. at present, but could become a future buff classic."

The Day of the Triffids
By John Wyndham
Del Rey, $2.95 (paper)

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris is not a name that comes immediately to mind when the immortals of science fiction come up. Nor, unfortunately, does plain old John Wyndham, which was JWPLBH's best-known *nom-de-plume*. He was one of the major SF writers of the nineteen-fifties (though the career started in 1930, and covered forty years under several different names). An SF movie classic was based—more or less directly for a change—on one of his novels (*Village of the Damned*). And yet he's not much read any more. This is undiscerning of the public, because he was an exceptional writer.

Back in print is his *The Day of the Triffids*, which was the first of his post-WW II novels, the first to be published under the Wyndham pseudonym, and the first to win him major recognition. It was also the first of the end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it novels that the tal-

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ented Brits of that period made practically their own. In this case, the downfall is brought on by two factors—a tricky case of cosmic coincidence, but Wyndham pulls it off. The first is a spectacular twenty-four-hour display of "meteors," seen by almost everyone in the world. In a matter of a few hours, everyone that has seen it is permanently blind. (Bill Masen, the book's narrator and hero, speculates later that it was not a natural phenomenon, but satellite weaponry that got out of hand.)

The second is a new sort of plant which has spread throughout the world. It is probably the product of a Russian experiment, the seeds of which escaped by accident. The "triffids" produce an invaluable oil, are mobile, have a lethal sting and eat the animals (and humans) they succeed in killing. Bill, hospitalized in London for an eye injury, wakes the morning after the meteor shower, waits for an attendant and finally removes the bandages himself to find that he's one of a handful of sighted in a blind world.

Wyndham's skill is in his extrapolation of what a metropolis gone blind would be like, both the expected (chaos) and the unexpected (the blind clever enough to capture and exploit the sighted). The reader finds himself uneasily envisioning his own locale in such circumstances. And when Bill abandons the horrors of the dying city for the country, it is full of roving triffids (until now kept penned), to whom the blind humans are easy prey. The story covers the first few weeks of the catastrophe, and then rapidly fills in a decade of survival among the ruins (and triffids). It's immensely satisfying, because Bill (and the heroine, Josella) are bright, articulate people, bringing their smarts to bear on survival, the moral choices (how many of the blind can you aid before it becomes counterproductive), and preserving something in the way of civilization. *The Day of the Triffids* is a succinct, intelligent thriller..

(Note—don't judge the book by the 1963 film travesty which attempted to be a monster movie [and didn't even succeed in that]. There is, however, a remarkable Anglo-Australian production made a few years ago, initially shown as a mini-series, which has appeared on a cable network here. Like so many of the British adaptations of novels for television, it sticks to the book—almost page by page—and captures its quality brilliantly.)

Shoptalk . . . The Good Old Days: Recently while rooting around in what passes in Manhattan for an attic (a small space in the rear of the sleeping loft), I came upon the *Norwesconews*, an advance promotion for the Eighth World Science Fiction Convention (the "Norwescon") held in Portland, Oregon, in 1950. One paragraph particularly got to me:

"You pay only $1 for a ticket for the NORWESCON Banquet. This is much less than the actual cost, but rather than carry over a large

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profit, the convention will absorb the difference, so that everyone can afford to come."

I must also pass on the following: Sign in a London butcher's shop (as reported in *Punch*): "*Watership Down*. You've read the book, you've seen the film, now eat the cast—rabbits £1.50."

* * *

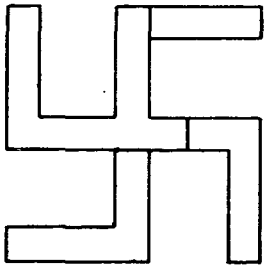
Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Alternate Asimov* (Doubleday, $16.95).

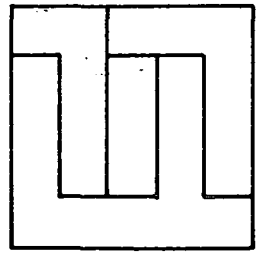
Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014 ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 183)

FINAL SOLUTION TO PUZZLE FLAGS ON MARS

The answer to last month's problem, cutting the swastika into four parts that will form a square, is shown below.





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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Here's a look at the whole Summer (post-exam) con(vention) season, up to the pre-WorldCon lull. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823–3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. For free listings, tell me about your con six months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, with a music keyboard.

MAY, 1986

29–June 1—**LepreCon.** For info, write: **Box 16815, Phoenix AZ 85011.** Or phone: **(602) 968–5749** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Phoenix AZ (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: editors Don & Elsie (DAW) Wollheim, artist Kim Poor, Peggy Crawford.

JUNE, 1986

6–8—**HatCon.** Ramada Inn, Danbury CT. **(203) 743–1872 & 775–4475.** Oriented to present & would-be SF pros, especially artists. Featuring Berkeley/Ace this year. S. Allison, G. Buchanan, S. Stone.

6–8—**SoonerCon.** Hilton Inn NW, Bethany OK. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, Tom Disch, artist Ellisa Schob.

6–8—**X-Con.** Olympia Spa, Milwaukee WI. Steven Brust. Back again for another year at Olympia Spa.

13–15—**Ad Astra, Box 7276, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9.** Roger Zelazny, Kelly Freas, Steven Brust.

20–21—**ConSpiracy, 39 Clark, Everett MA 02149.** A low-key con. Don't confuse with WorldCon 1987.

20–22—**LastCon, Box 13002, Albany NY 12212.** Robin McKinley, Wayne Barlowe (Extraterrestrials).

21–22—**4th St. Fantasy Con, c/o S. Brust, 4880 106th Av., Circle Pines MN 55014. (612) 784–2437.** Minneapolis MN. This guy Brust gets around. R. Zelazny, Tom Canty, Terri Windling, Valerie Smith.

JULY, 1986

3–6—**WesterCon, Box 81285, San Diego CA 92138.** A. K. A. "HalleyCon." David ("Sundiver") Brin, Greg Bear, fan Karen Turner. Masquerade. The 39th annual edition of the big, traveling Western con.

4–6—**NYClone, Box 608, Belle Mead NJ 08502.** A. (Rosinante) Gilliland, S. Plainfield NJ (nr. NYC)

4–6—**ConZinoience, % Hennig, Box 166362, Irving TX 75016** (near DFW). Media oriented, but fannish.

10–13—**EuroCon, % SFera, Ivaniogradska 41 A, 41000 Zagreb, Yugoslavia.** A. K. A. "BallCon." Yugoslav writer Dusan Vukotic, Dutch fan Roulof Goudriaan. 11th biennial European continental con.

AUGUST, 1986

28–Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 3277 Roswell Rd. #1986, Atlanta GA 30305.** Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon for 1986. Join early: rates go up steeply later on.

AUGUST, 1987

27–Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, England. WorldCon '87.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5–8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. NASFiC 1987, held since WorldCon's abroad.

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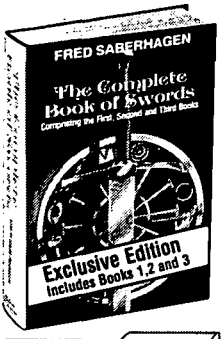
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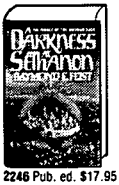

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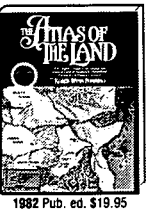

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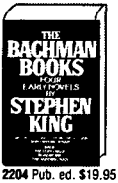

2204 Pub. ed. $19.95

2212 **Ender's Game; Speaker for the Dead.** Comb. pub. ed. $29.90

2428 **The Black Company; Shadows Linger; The White Rose.** Spec. ed.

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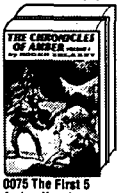

0075 **The First 5 Amber Novels.** 2 vols. Comb. pub. ed. $32.30

2022 **Doctor Who and the Deadly Assassin; Doctor Who and the Face of Evil; Doctor Who and the Robots of Death.** Spec. ed.

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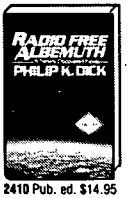

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